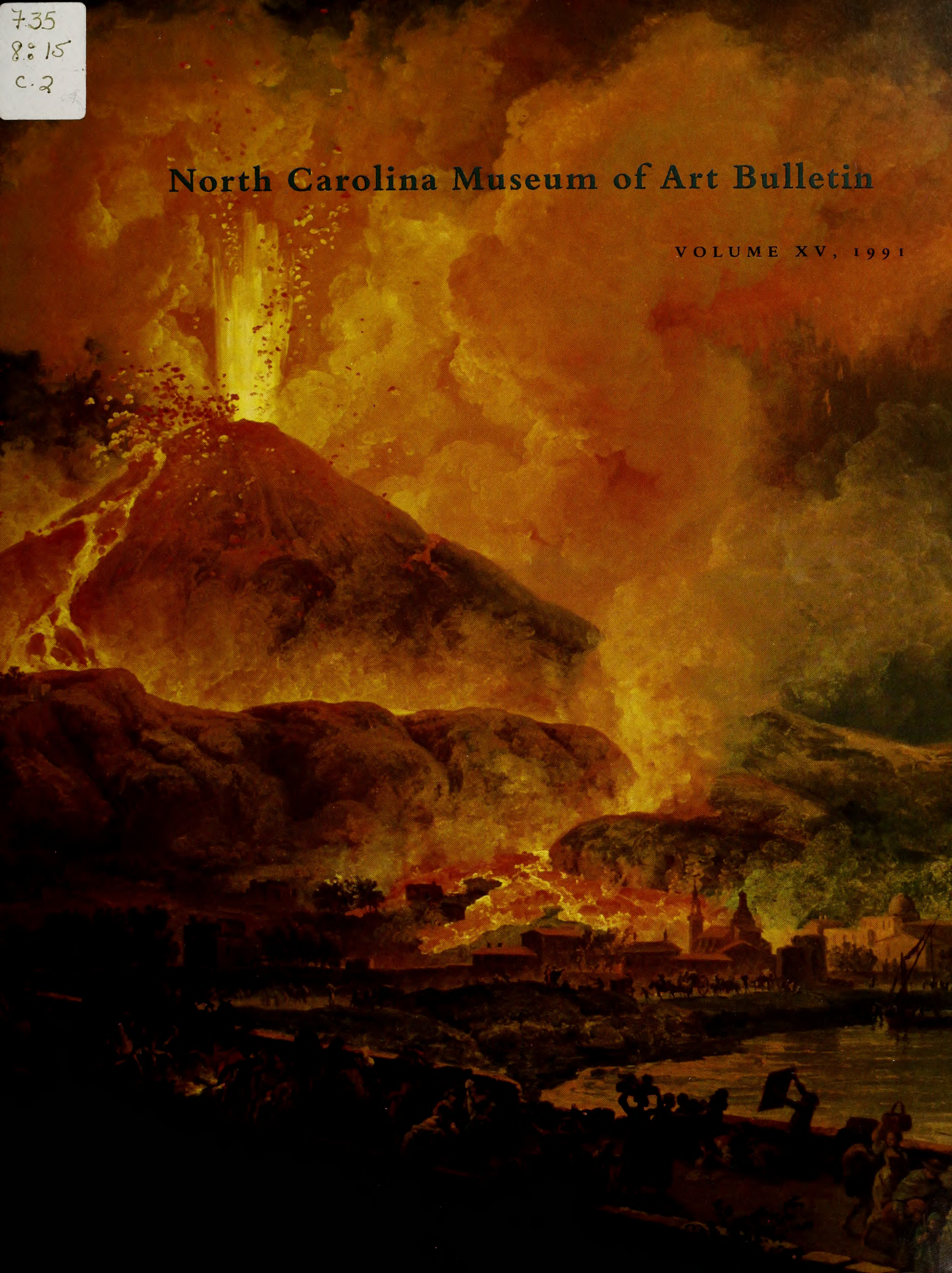


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# North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin

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**Cover:**

**Pierre-Jacques Volaire (1729-1802),  
*Eruption of Vesuvius*, c. 1777-80.  
Oil on canvas, 53¼ x 89 in.  
North Carolina Museum of Art.  
Purchased with funds from the  
Alcy C. Kendrick Bequest and the  
State of North Carolina. 82.1**

# North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin

*Volume XV, 1991*

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Fig. 1

Pierre-Jacques Volaire (1729-1802),

*Eruption of Vesuvius*, c. 1777-80.

Oil on canvas, 53 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 89 in.,

signed *Le C. er Volaire/ f.* at lower left.

North Carolina Museum of Art.

Purchased with funds from the

Alcy C. Kendrick Bequest and the

State of North Carolina. 82.1



“The most wonderful sight in Nature”:  
 Volaire’s *Eruption of Vesuvius*,  
 Commissioned by Henry Blundell

EDGAR PETERS BOWRON

PIERRE-JACQUES VOLAIRE’S *Eruption of Vesuvius* (fig. 1), acquired by the North Carolina Museum of Art in 1982, is an exceptionally engrossing work of art. The painting is an imaginative record of one of nature’s marvels, Vesuvius, the only active volcano on the European mainland.

The late eighteenth century’s fascination with natural catastrophes included storms, shipwrecks, fires, and earthquakes, but Vesuvius occasioned exceptional interest. Tourists from all parts of Europe flocked to Naples in the hope of witnessing the dreadful spectacle of an eruption. The attraction of Vesuvius was so popular late in the century that Goethe remarked on the “excited flurry” of Roman tourists hurrying off to Naples when news of an eruption arrived in 1787. Most tourists expected to be awed and terrified—although at a safe distance—by the volcano. And if they were well-read and acquainted with the ideas expressed by the English essayist and poet Joseph Addison or Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, they knew that the exhilaration they felt at the sight of Vesuvius was an example of the “sublime”—“the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”<sup>1</sup>



The *Eruption of Vesuvius* is a vivid example of the kind of painting British visitors to Italy on the Grand Tour acquired as a souvenir of their travels. Commissioned in Naples in 1777 by Henry Blundell, a wealthy Lancashire landowner who assembled significant collections of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and old master paintings, the painting was brought back to his house, Ince Blundell Hall, near Liverpool. Blundell might have ordered a view of Vesuvius from any of a number of landscape painters resident in Naples—the recent exhibitions in Naples and London, *In the Shadow of Vesuvius*,<sup>2</sup> underscore how many Italian and foreign artists made the eruptions of Vesuvius a prominent feature of their views and topographical renderings of Naples and its environs in the eighteenth century—but his choice of Volaire was not surprising. It was the French painter's ambition to make the volcano his stock-in-trade, and few artists equalled his imaginative conceptions of the exploding volcano in various formats. Energetic and prolific, Volaire possessed a natural instinct for the dramatic and the theatrical, and he employed it to create memorable images of this extraordinary phenomenon.

Voltaire was born in 1729 into a family of painters in Toulon and was probably trained by his father, Jacques, the official painter of the city. As a young man he was apprenticed to Claude Joseph Vernet, the landscape and marine painter, who arrived in Toulon in 1754 with a commission from King Louis XV to paint a series of canvases depicting the *Ports of France* (Musée de la Marine, Paris). During the course of Voltaire's travels from one port to another as Vernet's collaborator, he developed a style of painting remarkably close to that of the older painter. In 1763, when the commission was nearing its end, Voltaire left Vernet to return to Toulon. The following year he traveled to Rome, entered the local artists' academy, the Accademia di San Luca, and began to paint independent landscapes (*Shipwreck*, 1756, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). He moved to Naples in 1769, where he resided for most of the remainder of his life.<sup>3</sup>

In Naples Voltaire initially painted seascapes and topographical views (*Nocturne*, 1770, Musée National de Palais de Compiègne, Compiègne) in the manner of Vernet. By 1771, however, he had established himself as a specialist in volcanic eruptions, and he distinguished himself from the many other foreign painters in Naples with his spectacular scenes of Vesuvius in full eruption

at night. Although Voltaire did not invent the genre representing the volcano in moonlight, the violence of its eruption and the fiery flows of molten lava contrasting with the cool reflections of the moon on the surface of the Bay of Naples, no other painter quite matched his treatment of the subject or proved as popular with visitors to Naples.<sup>4</sup> Voltaire's many depictions of Vesuvius—of which more than thirty exist—earned him international fame, contributed to the popularity of the theme, and influenced the work of other foreign painters in Naples like Joseph Wright of Derby (who described the volcano as “the most wonderful sight in nature”<sup>5</sup>) and Philipp Hackert.

Voltaire exhibited in 1779, 1783, and 1786 at the Salon de la Correspondance in Paris, and in 1784 he became correspondent member of the Academy of Marseilles. In 1786 he attempted, unsuccessfully, through the Comte d'Angiviller, director-general of royal buildings in France, to persuade Louis XVI to buy one of his views of Vesuvius. His last dated works are a *Night Scene by the Shore in Naples* of 1784 (Palazzo Reale, Naples) and an *Eruption of Vesuvius* of 1785 (Musée des Beaux Arts, Toulon). He is usually believed to have died in Naples before 1802, but he may have been the “Voler peintre” who died in 1790 in Lerici, near Genoa, following mistreatment by the Neapolitan police.<sup>6</sup>

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Vesuvius originated during the late Pleistocene epoch, probably somewhat less than 200,000 years ago. Dormant for centuries, the volcanic mountain burst into history with a powerful eruption in A.D. 79 that buried the cities of Pompeii and Stabiae under ashes and cinders and the city of Herculaneum under a mud-flow. The volcano remained active until 1138 or 1139, after which there does not seem to have been an important eruption for about 500 years. But on 16 December 1631 Vesuvius reawakened catastrophically, destroying the villages of Portici, Resina, and Torre del Greco and killing between 3,000 and 18,000 inhabitants. From this moment the activity of Vesuvius captured the imagination of Italian and northern artists (Jan Asselyn, Thomas Wick, and Didier Barra) alike and entered the repertory of European painting.





Fig. 2  
 Pierre-Jacques Volaire,  
*Eruption of Vesuvius* (detail),  
 North Carolina Museum of Art.

In the eighteenth century, Vesuvius was continually violent. The eruption of 1707, during which the discharge of ash completely darkened Naples, was followed by other important outbursts in 1737, 1751, 1754, 1760, 1766, 1767, 1770, 1776, 1779, 1790, and 1794. These extraordinary conflagrations attracted attention throughout Europe, and along with the archaeological discoveries of Herculaneum and Pompeii, the eruptions of Vesuvius became one of the chief tourist attractions of Naples. The volcano also drew widespread scientific curiosity, although in the eighteenth century the study of volcanos was in its infancy. The first “vulcanological” writings of note are those of the Neapolitan physician and naturalist Francesco Serao on the eruption of 1737. The pamphlets and treaties devoted to subsequent eruptions became increasingly more sophisticated in their scientific method.

The most influential studies of Vesuvius in the eighteenth century were the writings of Sir William Hamilton, the diplomat, art collector, and antiquarian who arrived at Naples in 1764 as the new British envoy to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. During his first fifteen years in Naples, Hamilton climbed the slopes of Vesuvius 250 times and made nearly sixty inspections of the crater. He published his firsthand accounts of the volcano’s behavior in 1772 as *Observations on Mount Vesuvius, Mount Etna, and Other Volcanos: In a Series*

*of Letters Addressed to the Royal Society*, . . . , which was reprinted in 1776 with illustrations by Pietro Fabris as *Campi Phlegraei: Observations on the Volcanos of the Two Sicilies*.<sup>7</sup> Hamilton’s work was extensively discussed in such popular periodicals as the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review*, and it aroused the curiosity of the British in particular to visit Naples and see the extraordinary natural phenomenon at first hand.

Even today Hamilton’s compelling accounts provide a vivid impression of the awesome and terrible “powers of nature” recorded by Volaire: the “most dreadful inward grumbings” of the mountain; the violent explosions that “seemed as if the mountain would split in pieces”; the destructive force of the molten lava, which, “notwithstanding [its] consistency . . . ran with amazing velocity; I am sure, the first mile with a rapidity equal to that of the River Severn, at the passage near Bristol”; the “volcanick bombs” hurled into the air by the force of the explosion; and the deadly “ashes, or rather small cinders, showered down so fast that people were forced to use umbrellas” and covered roofs and balconies an inch thick.<sup>8</sup>

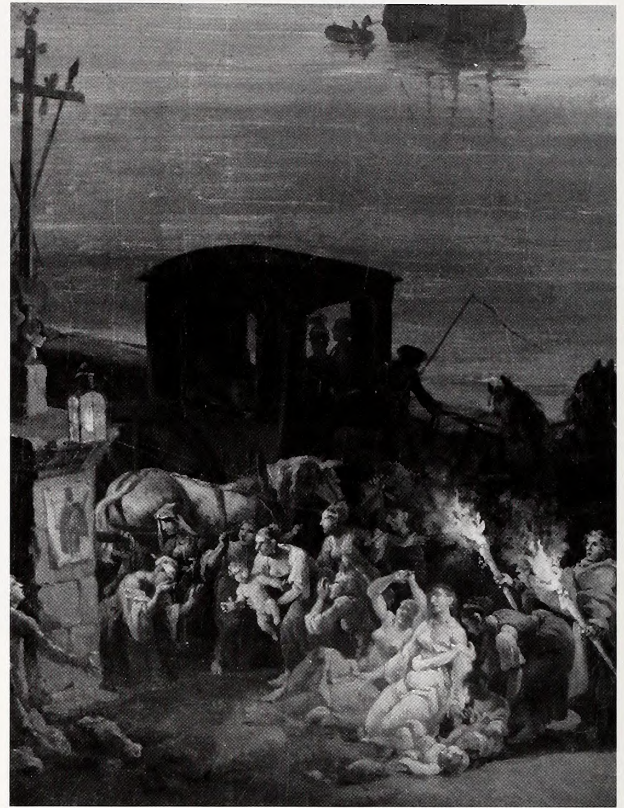
What Hamilton described with words, Volaire depicted with paint. This is how Blundell characterized the *Eruption of Vesuvius* in the 1803 catalogue of his collection:



This view of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which happened in 1769, was painted by Volaire of Naples, who was present at the time, and took accurate drawings of the different scenes which compose this picture. Volaire was a pupil of Vernet's, whose style of painting he imitated so well, that his pictures are esteemed as much as those of his master. The confusion of the people in their way from Portici to Naples, is well expressed; and the lights of the mountain dying gradually upon the vessels, are very masterly. No painter ever excelled Volaire in water, fire, and moonlight scenes. Many have attempted to paint eruptions of Mount Vesuvius; but unless they are present at the time of an eruption, such paintings must be very imperfect. A duplicate of this picture is at Towneley-Hall, which was ordered at the same time as this, viz. in 1777.<sup>9</sup>

Voltaire shows Vesuvius in full eruption above the town of Portici on the eastern shore of the Bay of Naples. A white-hot fountain of fire issues from the main cone and a fiery stream of lava flows down the slopes of the mountain into the town below. Vesuvius's second summit, Monte Somma, a ridge that half-encircles the main cone but is separated from it by a valley, is shown prominently at the left edge of the canvas (fig. 2). The volcano changed its configuration during the various eruptions in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so travelers' accounts and visual depictions often vary. Voltaire, however, represents the appearance of the volcano in the 1760s accurately, detailing topographical features like the *montagnoli*, or little mountains, formed by the explosion of 1760 on the descending slope of the mountain above the eastern, in the painting, right, edge of the town.

Portici, whose buildings are illuminated by the light of the flames, had become newly fashionable in the eighteenth century after King Charles III built a palace there in 1738 and the Neapolitan aristocracy established their villas and summer palaces in the area. The town was frequently threatened by lava flows, however, and numerous accounts attest to the constant danger of the eruptions in the 1760s and 1770s. Sir William Hamilton watched "rivers of fire" streaming down the slopes of Vesuvius during the eruption of 1767: "This last week exhibited a perpetual scene of horror," he writes, "the eruption of Mount Vesuvius having



continued with great violence. Many fine vineyards are destroy'd, but fortunately His Sicilian Majesty's palace and the museum at Portici have escaped by the lava's having taken another course when it was within a mile and a half of them."<sup>10</sup>

The eighteenth-century accounts of the major eruptions report the terror of the inhabitants of the villages to the south and east of the capital and their flight to the relative safety of Naples. Voltaire must have witnessed many such scenes during the eruptions in the 1770s, and in the painting includes a procession of persons, vehicles, and animals hurrying in the middle distance along the Strada Regia, the main thoroughfare connecting Portici with Naples, approximately five miles to the northeast. Scenes of people fleeing for shelter over the Sebeto River across the Ponte della Maddalena had been painted in Naples since the seventeenth century, so in showing the frenzied and desperate mob of refugees spilling across the bridge, Voltaire unites both his own on-the-spot observations and a traditional theme in Neapolitan painting.<sup>11</sup>

Another feature of the contemporary accounts of the eruptions of Vesuvius is the fervent faith of the





**Figs. 3 and 4**  
**Pierre-Jacques Volaire,**  
*Eruption of Vesuvius* (detail),  
 North Carolina Museum of Art.

Neapolitans in the protective powers of the tutelary saint of the city, Saint Januarius, or San Gennaro. Believed to have been martyred in the Diocletian persecution of A.D. 305, Januarius is well known for the liquefaction of a vial of his blood in the Cathedral of Naples. Neapolitans invoked his protection against various calamities, but in particular against eruptions of Vesuvius. Sir William Hamilton, describing the turmoil of the eruption of 20 October 1767, reported that "during the confusion of the night, . . . the mob also set fire to the Cardinal Archbishop's gate, because he refused to bring out the relicts of Saint Januarius."<sup>12</sup> Two nights later, "In the midst of these horrors, the mob, growing tumultuous and impatient, obliged the Cardinal to bring out the head of Saint Januarius, and go with it in procession to the Ponte Maddalena, at the extremity of Naples, towards Vesuvius; and it is well attested here, that the eruption ceased the moment the Saint came in sight of the mountain; it is true, the noise ceased about that time, after having lasted five hours, as it had done the preceding days."<sup>13</sup>

Those who had no access to the saintly relics made do with images in plaster and even drawings of the saint. During the eruption of 1766, Hamilton watched a flow of lava "destroy a poor man's vineyard, and surround his cottage, notwithstanding the opposition of many images of St. Januarius, that were placed upon the cottage, and tied to almost every vine."<sup>14</sup> In the lower right foreground of Blundell's *Eruption of Vesuvius*, a group of women and children kneel and pray in the Piazza al Ponte della Maddalena before an image of San Gennaro in bishop's robes fastened to a stone pier (fig. 3). A short distance to the left, on the bridge itself, a man holds aloft what must be an image of the saint toward the mountain (fig. 4). And on the crown of the bridge, a votive statue of Saint Januarius, designed by the Neapolitan sculptor Francesco Celebrano, faces Vesuvius (figs. 1 and 2). The statue, together with another representing Saint John of Nepomuk, was erected during the eruptions of 1767. Because only the the "miracle-working" statue of Januarius (as it was called in contemporary guides to the city) is shown installed on its base, it appears likely that Volaire intended to represent the eruption of 1767 and not, as stated by Blundell, 1769, a year in which there was no eruption.<sup>15</sup>



By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Grand Tour<sup>16</sup> had become a conventional feature of the education of the upper classes, especially in Britain. The tour almost invariably included sojourns in France or the Netherlands, and sometimes also in Austria or Germany, but the northern countries were rarely visited, and Vienna usually marked the eastern limit of the journey. The young British noblemen—and, increasingly, noblewomen—who took the tour usually spent several years traveling on the Continent, principally in Italy, where they could collect antiquities and works of art to take home with them. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Rome, Florence, and Naples had developed into the principal Italian destinations for the Grand Tourist and had become powerful magnets for the increasing number of young Irishmen, Englishmen, and Scots traveling abroad.

Henry Blundell (1724–1810) (fig. 5), unlike most of the sons of the aristocracy and landed gentry who had set out on the Grand Tour after leaving university, did not travel to Italy until middle age. Blundell, the scion of a distinguished Roman Catholic Lancashire family, was thirty-six when his father, Robert (whom he succeeded in 1771), made over to him the family seat, Ince Blundell Hall, near Liverpool. In the previous year he had married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir George Mostwyn of Talacre, and at about the same time his income had more than doubled by inheritance. Mrs. Blundell died in 1767, after having borne two daughters and a son. English penal laws against Roman Catholics in force at the time prevented Blundell from holding public office, and the honorary posts obtained by gentlemen of similar station were unavailable to him, so after the death of his wife he devoted his energies and his considerable fortune to collecting.<sup>17</sup>

Blundell began to collect paintings in England sometime between 1763 and 1767, and even before his visit to Italy commissioned four large landscapes of the Roman Campagna from Richard Wilson for a room at Ince.<sup>18</sup> The inspiration to collect on a grander scale seems to have come from Charles Townley, a Lancashire neighbor and fellow Roman Catholic, who in 1772 returned from seven years' residence in Rome with an important group of classical sculptures and antiquities that was to become one of the founding collections of the British Museum.



**Fig. 5**  
George Bullock,  
*Henry Blundell of Ince Blundell Hall, c. 1808–10.*  
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



The little that is known of Blundell's Grand Tour activities indicates that he was in Turin on 10 February 1777, preparing to set out for Milan and then Rome via Venice. He was reported to have left Rome in late April, presumably for Naples and the south of Italy.<sup>19</sup> In Rome he was accompanied by Townley and taken in hand by one of the leading *cicerone* to the visiting British tourists, Thomas Jenkins. Largely under Jenkins's guidance, Blundell bought antiquities from the Villa Mattei and the Villa d'Este as well as from the collections of other Roman families including the Altieri, Borioni, Capponi, and Negroni. He made subsequent trips to Rome in 1782 to 1783, 1786, and possibly 1790, and during all of these visits he bought sculptures and paintings from the English dealers—Jenkins, Gavin Hamilton, James Byres, and Father John Thorpe; and from Italian dealers, antiquarians, and sculptors like Albacini, Volpato, and Antonio d'Este.

It has been said that "Henry Blundell took to collecting with an enthusiasm bordering on obsession."<sup>20</sup> At the time of his death in 1810 there were over 500 pieces of ancient sculpture at Ince. The collection was one of the two largest private collections of ancient marbles ever formed in Great Britain—Townley's was the other—and was comparable in importance and quality to those created in the 1770s by the other great British collectors of classical sculpture and antiquities, William Weddell of Newby, and John Smith-Barry of Marbury Hall. Upon his return to Lancashire, in order to house his collection of antique sculpture, which remains virtually intact and in the care of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, he converted a garden building into a classical temple. In 1809, in order to contain the overflow, he built a small-scale replica of the Pantheon at Ince that is an exemplar of the neoclassical English dilettante's gallery.

Blundell's enthusiasm for pictures matched his passion for antique sculpture, and the 1803 catalogue of his collection, *An Account of the Statues, Busts, Bass-Relieves, Cinerary Urns and Other Ancient Marbles and Paintings at Ince*, lists 197 paintings and drawings.<sup>21</sup> The collection he assembled at Ince reflected the prevailing taste of the period for the Italian baroque, including numerous pictures, often religious in subject, by or after Domenichino, Luca Giordano, Guercino, Giovanni Lanfranco, Pier Francesco Mola, Simone Pignone, Guido Reni, Bartolommeo Schedoni, and Giovanni

Francesco Romanelli, and for Dutch seventeenth-century landscapes and genre scenes. Blundell's niche in the history of British art collecting, however, was secured by his early interest in "primitives," or paintings of the Netherlandish and Italian schools before 1500. His greatest individual painting was the *Virgin and Child*, signed and dated 1432 by Jan van Eyck (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), but he also owned pictures by or in the manner of Joos van Cleve, Dieric Bouts, Hans Memling, the Master of St. Bartholomew, Jacopo del Sellaio, and Bernardo Daddi.

In Italy, Henry Blundell patronized Antonio Canova and acquired numerous works by contemporary painters including Pompeo Batoni, Giuseppe Cades, Antonio Cavallucci, Corrado Giaquinto, Anton Raphael Mengs, and Pietro di Pietri. Like many of his English compatriots, he had a great passion for landscape painting, and his collection contained dozens of landscape and topographical paintings by Dutch, English, French, and Italian artists. And like many Grand Tourists, he avidly sought topographical views of the sights he had visited on his Italian sojourn, in particular views of Rome, Venice, Naples, and their environs. When he got to Rome, for example, he purchased five landscapes by Carlo Labruzzi and a pair by Jan Frans Van Bloemen with figures by Placido Costanzi.

But for Blundell it was Naples that proved truly magical. "Naples must have been a paradise for travelers in the eighteenth century," Sir Brinsley Ford has written. "There were countless delightful expeditions to be made, many of them by boat, to Posillipo, to Virgil's tomb, to Baiae, to Capri, and sometimes farther afield to Paestum. Of course the crowning expedition of all was the ascent of Vesuvius."<sup>22</sup> It is not known whether Blundell actually ascended the slopes of the volcano, but he bought views of the city and its environs, each of which appears to have been acquired directly from the painters involved: Adrien Manglard, a pair of seascapes; Pietro Antoniani, four views of Naples; and Volaire, the *Eruption of Vesuvius*.

Francis Russell has established the importance of Charles Townley's role in the commissioning of the painting now in the North Carolina Museum of Art. Townley, during a previous trip to Naples in 1768, commissioned from Volaire two views of Vesuvius, which remain untraced, depicting the eruption of









Fig. 6  
Pierre-Jacques Volaire,  
*Eruption of Vesuvius*, c. 1777-82.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes.

Fig. 7  
Pierre-Jacques Volaire,  
*Eruption of Vesuvius*, 1782.  
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

Fig. 8  
Pierre-Jacques Volaire,  
*Eruption of Vesuvius*, c. 1777-82.  
Museo Irpino, Avellino.

1767.<sup>23</sup> Townley visited Naples again in 1772 and 1773, when he no doubt met Volaire, and he returned with Henry Blundell in 1777, when the identical pair of views of Vesuvius, of which only the version in Raleigh survives, was ordered. Townley's agent in Naples had been Mr. Leigh, whose death after the pictures had been commissioned led Townley to call on the services of Thomas Jenkins in Rome. On 21 November 1780 Townley asked Jenkins to recover from Leigh's associate "the two pictures of the eruption of Vesuvius by Mons. Volaire, and which were consigned by Volaire to Mr. Leigh a little time before his death, the two pictures belong to Mr. Blundell and myself."<sup>24</sup>

Henry Blundell's *Eruption of Vesuvius*, the grandest and most imaginative of Volaire's paintings of the subject, was obviously a great success. The painting became the model for several replicas, which include the lost canvas commissioned by Townley; a signed painting in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes (fig. 6); a signed and dated version of 1782 in the Museo Capodimonte (fig. 7) as well as two unsigned canvases—evidently autograph—in the Museo del Sannio, Benevento, and in the Museo Irpino, Avellino (fig. 8).<sup>25</sup> Each of the later versions contains minor differ-



ences in detail, but adheres generally to the compositional formula of the prototype.

What sets this group of scenes of Vesuvius apart from the artist's other treatments of the theme is the focus on the destructiveness and malevolence of the volcano rather than on its purely picturesque interest. Although it is true that as the century progressed, Vesuvius was increasingly appreciated by an enlightened, upper-class audience of visitors from the north of Europe as beneficent and creative and even as revealing a "wise purpose,"<sup>26</sup> in Sir William Hamilton's words, for the general population in and around Naples an eruption of Vesuvius was a terrifying, calamitous event. By focusing on the rout of the "vulgar mob" in their flight from the lava flows and the bombardment of rocks, ashes, and cinders, Volaire has invested his depiction of Vesuvius with a dramatic interest absent from his other treatments of the theme, which usually show spectators viewing the volcano from the relative safety of the Atrio del Cavallo, a ridge near the Monte Somma, or from Naples itself, and waving their hats and cheering as if watching a display of fireworks.

In its wide-screen view of the exploding volcano, its dramatic power, and its spectacular effects of light, Henry Blundell's *Eruption of Vesuvius* proclaims itself a tour de force. The work represents the successful culmination of nearly a decade of experimentation with different views of Vesuvius and is unquestionably Volaire's masterpiece. His lively handling of paint confirms the observations of the late Neapolitan art historian Raffaello Causa that Volaire "was at his most innovative and interesting when he experimented with a kind of abbreviated painterly handwriting, applying dense and luminous impastos to his canvas to give a sense of the presence and heat of fiery red lava."<sup>27</sup> In no other canvas did Volaire so effectively contrast the brilliance of the bursting volcano with the silvery reflections of the full moon on the surface of the sea. And in showing the panic of the crowd fleeing from Portici to Naples, Volaire has invigorated the traditional picturesque view of Vesuvius with a dramatic force that commands our attention more than two hundred years later.

Edgar Peters Bowron is Andrew W. Mellon Senior Consultative Curator at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. He was director of the North Carolina Museum of Art from 1981 to 1985.

## Provenance

Commissioned in 1777 by Henry Blundell, for Ince Blundell Hall, Lancashire, England; thence by family descent to Col. Sir Joseph Weld, who sold Ince in 1960, but kept the art collections, transferring the paintings to Lulworth Castle, Dorset, in 1961; his sale Christie's, London, 12 December 1980, lot 104; [Agnew's, London]; acquired by the North Carolina Museum of Art from Agnew's, 1982.

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## Notes

I wish to thank Burton Frederickson, Francis Russell, Susan Sivard, and Kim Sloan for their help during the preparation of this article.

1. E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (London, 1987), 39: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion of which the mind is capable of feeling."
2. *All'ombra del Vesuvio. Napoli nella veduta europea da Quattrocento all'Ottocento* [exh. cat., Castel Sant'Elmo] (Naples, 1990), and *In the Shadow of Vesuvius* [exh. cat., Accademia Italiana] (London, 1990). See also A. P. Murphy, *Visions of Vesuvius* [exh. cat., Museum of Fine Arts] (Boston, 1978), for an earlier survey of representations of Vesuvius by artists from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.
3. The basic sources for Volaire's life and art can be found in the discussions by J. Foucart, in *French Painting 1774–1830: The Age of Revolution* [exh. cat., Grand Palais, Detroit Institute of Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art] (Paris, Detroit, New York, 1974–75), 674–77; Causa Picone, 24–48; and P. Bédarida, in *All'ombra del Vesuvio*, 432–34.
4. Carlo Bonavia painted several eruptions of Vesuvius in moonlight during the 1750s (W. G. Constable, "Carlo Bonavia," *Art Quarterly* 22 (1959): 29, 30, figs. 8, 9; and "Carlo Bonavia: An Addendum," *Art Quarterly* 25 (1962): 122, fig. 1); and Charles-François Grenier de La Croix, called Lacroix de Marseille, painted views of Vesuvius in the 1760s with the moon rising above the



- Bay of Naples (P. Rosenberg and M. C. Stewart, *French Paintings 1500–1825. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco* [San Francisco, 1987]: 196–97). Although each anticipates elements of Voltaire's later views of Vesuvius—the volcano in eruption, the moonlight reflecting on the surface of the Bay of Naples, and the silhouettes of the ships' rigging—Voltaire's treatment of the subject is altogether more visionary and imaginative.
5. Joseph Wright, quoted by B. Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Light* (London, 1968), 1: 77.
  6. Foucart, 675.
  7. For a discussion of the importance of the *Campi Phlegraei*, see C. Knight, "Sir William Hamilton's *Campi Phlegraei* and the Artistic Contribution of Peter Fabris," *Oxford, China, and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. E. Chaney and N. Ritchie (London, 1984), 192–208.
  8. W. Hamilton, *Observations on Mount Vesuvius, Mount Etna, and Other Volcanoes: In a Series of Letters Addressed to the Royal Society*, . . . (London, 1772), 10, 32, 33.
  9. Blundell, 227–28.
  10. B. Fothergill, *Sir William Hamilton. Envoy Extraordinary* (London, 1969), 89, quoting B. M. Egerton ms. 2634, fol. 350. On an excursion to Vesuvius on 16 September 1778, Thomas Jones saw a "tremendous burning River" that "Roll'd & tumbled forward with a Slow motion in a Stream about as wide as the Tiber at Rome" ("Memoirs of Thomas Jones," ed. A. P. Oppé, *The Walpole Society* 32 [1946–48] [1951]: 78).
  11. Scipione Campagno represented the procession of 17 January 1631 to the foot of the Ponte della Maddalena to implore San Gennaro to end the eruption of Vesuvius (*All'ombra del Vesuvio*, 372, fig. 283, illustrating a replica in a private collection, Naples, of a painting on copper in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, signed and dated 1631).
  12. Hamilton, 32. Thomas Jones witnessed, during an excursion to Portici in 1778, a ritual procession in which a bronze bust of the saint rather than his skull in Naples cathedral was "employed towards the Mountain, in order to put a stop to the further depredations of the Lava" ("Memoirs," 78).
  13. Hamilton, 35.
  14. *Ibid.*, 11.
  15. For a drawing depicting the eruption of 1779 by Louis Jean Desprez in which the statues of San Gennaro and San Giovanni Nepomuceno are erected on altars on the bridge, see N. G. Wollin, *Gravures originales de Desprez ou exécutées d'après ses dessins* (Malmö, 1933), 112, 167, fig. 55. Although the dates generally assigned to the various eruptions depicted by Voltaire must be accepted provisionally until his paintings are examined more closely in comparison with contemporary prints, maps, and illustrated guides, he evidently made use of engravings and the work of other artists to achieve accurate representations of eruptions that occurred before his arrival in Naples in 1769. For example, the present painting does not represent Portici as it appeared in 1777 at the time of its execution because there is no evidence of the Nuovo Porto, constructed between 1773 and 1775.
  16. For an introduction to the subject, see B. Ford, "The Grand Tour," *Apollo* 114 (December 1981): 390–400.
  17. For a general account of Blundell and Ince, see C. Hussey, "Ince Blundell Hall, Lancashire: I. The Property of the Trustees of Ince Blundell Settled Estate," *Country Life* 123 (10 April 1958): 756–59; "II," *Country Life* 123 (17 April 1958): 816–19; "III," *Country Life* 123 (24 April 1958): 876–79.
  18. W. G. Constable, *Richard Wilson* (London, 1953), 43, notes that the work was largely carried out by pupils under the supervision of Wilson.
  19. Information from the archives of Sir Brinsley Ford relating to the British in Italy in the eighteenth century, The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London.
  20. J. Fejfer and E. Southworth, "Summer in England—Ince Blundell Hall Revisited," *Apollo* 129 (March 1989): 179.
  21. For Blundell's collection of paintings, see Jacob, 5–8; and *Paintings from the Luhworth Castle Gallery* [exh. cat., Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum] (Bournemouth, 1967). Gerard Vaughan, Wolfson College, Oxford, is preparing a study of Henry Blundell as a collector for the series of catalogues of the Ince Blundell collections of classical sculpture in the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside.
  22. Ford, 396.
  23. F. Russell, "Voltaire and Charles Townley," unpublished article, 1985, 1, based on the Townley papers deposited in the Lancashire Record Office, Preston. The contract of 19 March 1768 was signed by both Voltaire and Townley (Townley mss. DDTO, GVA), and after the latter's departure for Rome, he continued to receive a number of letters from the painter. I am extremely grateful to Francis Russell for permitting me to publish his research.
  24. Russell, "Voltaire and Charles Townley," 7, "Ac[coun]ts in France and Italy from 28.Octob:1771 to 13.Feb:1774," Townley mss. DDTO, GVH.
  25. Spinosa and Di Mauro, 196. For the version in Nantes, see *French Painting: The Revolutionary Decades, 1760–1830* [exh. cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria] (Sydney, Melbourne, 1980–81), 7, 235 ill.; for the Museo Capodimonte painting, see *All'ombra del Vesuvio*, 291, 434 ill.; and for the version in Avellino, see *Arte francese a Napoli* [exh. cat., Palazzo Reale] (Naples, 1967), no. 41, fig. 37.
  26. S. Sivard, "Some Wise Purpose: Volcanic Imagery in the Late Eighteenth Century," paper delivered at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., 21 February 1990, observes the changes during the second half of the eighteenth century in the interpretation of images of volcanos and texts concerning eruptions. Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), for example, distinguished between the responses of the enlightened or educated person and the "untutored man" to natural catastrophes. The latter can discover only "misery, pain, and distress" in a natural disaster such as the eruption of Vesuvius. The enlightened individual, however, can understand the volcano "in a creative rather than a destructive light." In Sir William Hamilton's view, the calamities suffered by Pompeii and Herculaneum were only "partial misfortunes, on the great scale of nature, it was no more than the chance or ill fate of these cities to have stood in the line of one of its operations; intended perhaps for some wise purpose, and the benefit of future generations." S. Sivard, "The Volcano in European and American Art, 1770–1870" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University), provides a thoughtful analysis of a wide range of material in her forthcoming dissertation on volcanic imagery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
  27. R. Causa, "Foreign View-Painters in Naples," *The Golden Age of Naples: Art and Civilization Under the Bourbons 1734–1805* [exh. cat., Detroit Institute of Arts, Art Institute of Chicago] (Detroit, Chicago, 1980–81), 1: 187.







Two Views by Bernardo Bellotto:  
*View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left* and  
*View of Dresden with the Hofkirche at Right*

WILLIAM BARCHAM

IN 1952 the North Carolina Museum of Art acquired two spectacular views of the city of Dresden by the Venetian artist Bernardo Bellotto.<sup>1</sup> The paintings, executed in 1747 and 1748, show the famous Saxon capital as it looked along the banks of the Elbe River at midcentury. The two views are complementary, for each depicts a different side of the river. In *View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left* (fig. 1), we look from the river's right bank, from the Neustadt or New City, at the Augustusbrücke, the Hofkirche, which is toward the left center of the painting and shown with its facade in scaffolding, and the Frauenkirche at the far left. The other painting, *View of Dresden with the Hofkirche at Right* (fig. 2), places us on the Elbe's left side, in the Altstadt, with the Hofkirche now almost directly before us.

Both views of Dresden are spectacular for their panoramic breadth, their utterly convincing depiction of deep space, and the dramatic contrasts of heavy shadow and bright sunlight. Captivating as well are the many beautifully painted architectural details and staffage. In both paintings, a series of orthogonals seems to converge toward the center (although actually, the system here is imperfect). More powerful than the plunge into depth, however, is the panoramic breadth that Bellotto creates by employing the same elements in each case, but in a converse relationship. In the *View with*

Fig. 1  
 Bernardo Bellotto (1720-1780),  
*View of Dresden with the  
 Frauenkirche at Left*, 1747.  
 Oil on canvas, 59 x 93 in.,  
 signed BERNARDO BELLOTTO/  
 DETTO CANALETO/F.  
 ANNO 1747 DRESDA  
 at lower left. North Carolina  
 Museum of Art. 52.9.145

Fig. 2  
 Bernardo Bellotto (1720-1780),  
*View of Dresden with the  
 Hofkirche at Right*, 1748.  
 Oil on canvas, 59 x 93 in.,  
 signed . . . o Bellotto Detto Canaleto  
 F. Anno 1748 at lower left.  
 North Carolina Museum of Art.  
 52.9.146





the *Frauenkirche* (fig. 1), Bellotto manipulates the arcaded bridge to counteract the perspectival recession of the river; in the *View with the Hofkirche* (fig. 2), the artist uses the turn of that same river to cut the bridge, whose lines now do not expand horizontally across the canvas but rather pull into the distance.

But the importance of Bellotto's two paintings lies not only in their pictorial effects; the two works are also important documents of the history of Saxon culture. Grand in scale—each approximately five feet in height and almost eight feet in width, these views of Dresden show us the architectural and cultural achievements of two electors of Saxony, who were also kings of Poland, and they remind us as well of the significant position that the court of Dresden held in Europe during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Bernardo Bellotto was born in Venice in 1721 to Fiorenza Domenica Canal and Lorenzo Bellotto.<sup>2</sup> He could not have been more fortunate in his birth, both for the family into which he was born and the time of his arrival. His mother was the sister of the famous

Venetian view painter Antonio Canaletto, who during the 1720s and 1730s was developing into one of the greatest artists of the century.

During the 1730s, Antonio Canaletto was at the very height of his artistic powers and enjoyed his greatest popularity. After only a little more than fifteen years as an artist, he had more commissions arriving at his door than he could possibly handle, and this with his asking very high prices.<sup>3</sup> In actuality, Canaletto had no serious artistic competition; the market for Venetian views was totally his. And, during the early part of the second quarter of the century, the market was a thoroughly thriving one, depending for the most part on foreign tourism. Englishmen, in particular, were traveling on the continent for their Grand Tours, and Venice was one of the cities they visited. After crossing the Alps, they made their way east from Milan, perhaps visiting Bergamo, Verona, or Vicenza. Finally, after stopping at Padua, they hired a boat that ferried them across the Venetian lagoon. They were amazed at the city that greeted them, at its very special relationship





**Fig. 3**  
**Antonio Canaletto,**  
*Grand Canal: Looking North from*  
*near the Rialto Bridge, 1725.*  
 Private collection.

**Fig. 4**  
**Antonio Canaletto,**  
*The Bacino di San Marco:*  
*Looking East, c. 1738.*  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
 Abbott Lawrence Fund,  
 Seth K. Sweetser Fund, and  
 Charles Edward French Fund.

with the sky and the sea, at its unique urban organization, and at its magnificent architecture. And because Venice was most likely their first real period of rest after a tiring journey across Europe, they usually spent a week or two there. Quite understandably, the visiting English lords wanted mementos of their visits to Venice and of the extraordinary sights that they could encounter only there. No one could provide them with more beautiful images or more precise descriptions of this unforgettable experience than Antonio Canaletto.

Canaletto's pictorial formula, developed during the early 1720s, was based on the depiction of one of Venice's canals or squares in order to create a deep view into urban space; he set this space under a broad expanse of sky filled with dramatically streaking clouds. A good example of this is *Grand Canal: Looking North from near the Rialto Bridge*, now in a private collection (fig. 3), in which deep shadows fall horizontally across the canvas; they contrast luministically with the bright facades along the embankments, and compositionally with the recession of the canal itself. During the 1730s, as



Fig. 5  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Florence with the Arno River  
and the Ponte Vecchio*, c. 1742.  
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge,  
England.



Fig. 6  
Antonio Canaletto,  
*View of the Grand Canal with  
the Rialto Bridge*, c. 1733-35.  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte  
Antica, Rome.



Canaletto's art matured, it became more and more complex. He began to create urban scenes that were more panoramic in scope than deep in recession. In these paintings, Venice seems to expand in breadth, its space inflated and filled with bright sunshine. Moreover, the city no longer is shown in winter or autumn but instead in springtime, and as a result Canaletto's colors shift from russet browns to rosy pinks and cerulean blues. His masterpiece of this period is *The Bacino di San Marco: Looking East*, a painting now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (fig. 4). There, perspectival orthogonals have been done away with completely to avoid the rigidly organized, boxlike spaces painted in the previous decade.

Perhaps as a result of excellent schooling from his especially attentive uncle, Bellotto's professional accomplishments were great enough in 1738 at age seventeen for his name to be added to the lists of membership in the *Fraglia*, the Venetian guild of painters. Between 1738 and 1747, that is between his inscription into the *Fraglia* and his departure for Germany, Bellotto executed many views of Venice, Florence, Rome, Milan, Turin, and Verona, as well as a few of the north Italian countryside.<sup>4</sup> All these works make manifest Bellotto's understanding of Canaletto's art. For instance, in a *View of Florence with the Arno River and the Ponte Vecchio* (fig. 5), the nephew clearly repeats his uncle's formula as seen, for instance, in the *View of the Grand Canal with the Rialto Bridge* (fig. 6), a work most likely done in the mid-1730s. Using the river exactly as Canaletto uses the Grand Canal, Bellotto depicts the Arno as a closed spatial compartment, the Ponte Vecchio cutting the view into the distance as the Rialto does in the painting in figure 6. In both works, boats accentuate the movement into depth, and they emphasize, too, breadth from one embankment to another. In both canvases also, the bridges' darkened arches create a luministic contrast with the bright area immediately beyond. Finally, the buildings on the left in Bellotto's painting contrast dramatically with those facing them, just as Canaletto differentiates between the Riva del Carbon and the Riva del Vin.

Despite the similarities to his uncle's work, there appeared in the young Bellotto's art a pictorial conception of a view that, already in the early 1740s, was radically different. The differences between the two can be most easily understood by looking at one of Bellotto's early views of the north Italian countryside,



Fig. 7  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Gazzada*, c. 1744-47.  
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

the *View of Gazzada* (fig. 7). The focus on landscape is in itself a remarkable change, for rarely did Canaletto produce anything similar in subject matter. His principal concern was almost always a city's urban fabric, not the villa or village outside it.<sup>5</sup> In Bellotto's very beautiful painting, there is a unifying tonality of deep greens, interspersed here and there with small areas of beige or cream. Unlike in Canaletto's early works, there are no contrasting touches of yellow or pink to enrich the canvas's surface appeal. Bellotto also avoids long, cutting lines that might denote the presence of large architectural forms. In such a manner, he creates a pure landscape that appears to have been quickly and spontaneously painted. This work and others like it look profoundly different from anything that Canaletto ever painted.

The lives and careers of both uncle and nephew were changed by the War of the Austrian Succession, which had broken out in 1742 and cut tourism to Italy down to a trickle.<sup>6</sup> As requests for views declined in number, Canaletto was forced, early in the decade, to take on new kinds of commissions,<sup>7</sup> and Bellotto traveled from city to city to find adequate employment. By 1746 the situation was sufficiently grave that even the famous Canaletto had to leave Venice. Acting probably on a suggestion from Joseph Smith, consul from the Court of St. James to the Venetian Republic and a long-time patron, Canaletto moved to London.<sup>8</sup> There, he painted views of the city, its new monuments—the bridge at Westminster, for instance—country views, and the nobility's estates.





**Fig. 8**  
 Antonio Canaletto (1697–1768),  
*Capriccio: The Rialto Bridge and*  
*the Church of S. Giorgio Maggiore*,  
 c. 1750–60. Oil on canvas, 66 x 45 in.  
 North Carolina Museum of Art.  
 52.9.149

He also produced several *capricci*, or fantasy views, conglomerations of imaginary and/or real architectural monuments placed in urban or country settings. One famous pair, the so-called “Lovelace Capriccios” now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., shows a set of river landscapes, both containing ancient Roman structures, Gothic monuments, and pieces of English architecture. They are typical of the artist’s pictorial whimsy, fascinating the viewer with their miscellany of unrelated buildings placed together in a coherent image. Another such caprice by Canaletto, vertical in format like the Lovelace paintings and also probably dating from late in the artist’s English period (c. 1750–60), is his *Capriccio: The Rialto Bridge and the Church of S. Giorgio Maggiore* (fig. 8), now in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art. Transposing Palladio’s church of S. Giorgio Maggiore, begun in 1566 and completed in 1611, from its actual site across from the Ducal Palace to Venice’s historic center, adjacent to the city’s famous Rialto Bridge, the painter creates a new urban complex, very familiar and yet completely novel. Instead of portraying the real commercial buildings and patrician palaces along the Grand Canal’s two near embankments, Canaletto inserts Venice’s most famous sixteenth-century church on one of them and, opposite it, at the far left, a palace “lifted” from outside the city. Thus Canaletto plays havoc with the Rialto Bridge’s traditional association with business, transforming the area into a major ecclesiastical center. The position of the church’s quay, jutting out irregularly into the Grand Canal so that boats can no longer easily maneuver along the waterway, emphasizes the geographical metamorphosis.

Soon after Canaletto moved to England in 1746, where he would remain for about a decade, Bellotto left for Germany. Although the uncle returned home in 1755, the nephew would never again see Italy. Bellotto’s decision to quit Venice was prompted by an official invitation from the government of Augustus III. Augustus had been ruling in Dresden as both elector of Saxony and king of Poland since 1733. He was a member of the Wettin family, who had been in control of the city of Dresden as margraves of Meissen since the early fourteenth century. From the sixteenth century on, Dresden had flourished under the Wettin.<sup>9</sup> Several of the margraves imported artists from Italy, and they built up important collections of art. Large-scale architectural

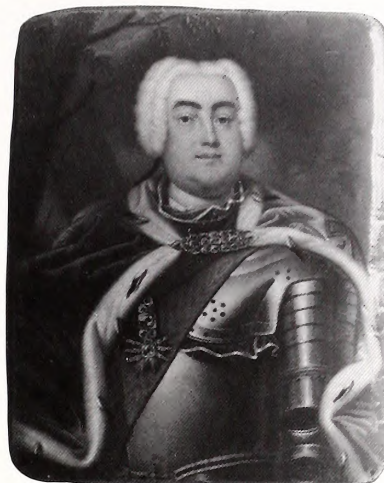


work and renovations were begun after a dreadful fire swept across the city in 1591. Until the reign of Augustus the Strong, however, artistic activity in Dresden did not reach its peak.

Augustus the Strong, born in 1660, succeeded to the title of elector in 1694. As Friedrich Augustus I, he not only ruled over Saxony but was also enfranchised, together with a small group of other German princes, to elect the Holy Roman Emperor whenever that post fell vacant. In addition, Augustus, like the other electors, was allowed to accept the crown of another country should it be offered. Such events did happen, as when the elector of Brandenburg became the king of Prussia in 1701 or when the elector of Hanover became king of England in 1714.<sup>10</sup> Augustus preceded them both in his elevation to a throne: in 1697 he accepted the invitation of the nobles of Poland, who traditionally met to elect their king, to become their ruler. But Augustus had to make one drastic alteration in his life. The terms of the Polish election specified that the king be Catholic like his future subjects, and in compliance, Augustus converted from the Protestant faith to which all the rulers of Saxony had adhered since the Reform in 1539.

Although now kind of Poland, Augustus remained in Dresden and ruled from there. His commitment to enhancing the beauties of Dresden can be traced from the moment of his conversion and his accession to the Polish throne. His projects for the city were numerous, but only several of the most important can be mentioned here. In 1705 he appointed as court architect Mathaes Daniel Poppelmann (1661–1736), who created a series of splendid palaces. The most famous is the Zwinger, which was begun around 1710. Although never actually completed, the Zwinger's Kronentor and Wallpavillon represent the high point of the rococo style in Saxony. Several years later, Poppelmann began renovations on the most historic bridge crossing the Elbe, the Augustusbrücke. Dating back to the twelfth century and connecting the two halves of the city, the bridge's importance to Dresden can be judged by the significant place given it in both of Bellotto's views.<sup>11</sup>

Other important works conceived by Augustus II include the opening of the Royal Painting Gallery, now the Gemäldegalerie, the creation of the Kupferstich Kabinett (the print collection), and the opening of the Grünes Gewölbe (the green vault), the first treasure museum open to the public.<sup>12</sup> Augustus also established



**Fig. 9**  
Enamel miniature of Augustus III,  
Grünes Gewölbe, Staatliche  
Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

a porcelain factory at Meissen, which in 1710 began to produce some of the most beautiful works of their kind, and he eventually created a museum for their display. The Frauenkirche, Dresden's most important Protestant church and depicted in one of the views in Raleigh (fig. 1), was begun in this same period by the architect Georg Bahr (1666–1738). Augustus's reign was characterized also by expansion in related areas of interest. For example, the king financed a scientific expedition to Africa and encouraged publications on ethnology. In sum, Augustus II's long reign in Dresden transformed the city architecturally, culturally, and intellectually. (The king also significantly increased the population; he sired 354 children out of wedlock.)

When he died in 1733, Augustus II was succeeded by his son, who, as elector of Saxony, had become Friedrich Augustus II. With the diplomatic aid of Austria, Russia, and Prussia, he, too, managed to win the Polish crown, ruling as Augustus III (fig. 9). Augustus III turned over the running of his government to an ambitious young man, Heinrich Brühl (fig. 10). Although Brühl had no particular genius and little educational background, it was he who helped Augustus carry on his father's cultural and artistic projects and who brought Bernardo Bellotto to Dresden in 1747.





Fig. 10  
J. J. Baléchou, after Louis Silvestre the Younger, *Count Heinrich Brühl* (detail), c. 1750.



Fig. 11  
Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Count Algarotti*, c. 1745. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Born in 1700, at age thirteen Brühl became a page to Gräfin Federika Elisabeth, the widow of the Duke of Saxony-Weissenfels.<sup>13</sup> While traveling with Federika in 1720, Brühl managed to detach himself from her retinue and to attach himself instead to the Saxon court, where eventually—and amazingly—he became court chamberlain to Augustus II in 1730. Upon Augustus III's accession to the throne three years later, Brühl succeeded in becoming president of the chamber, the head of the entire governmental administration, as well as the director of the collections of art. And through further intriguing, in 1746 Brühl rose to become first minister to the king.

Among Brühl's responsibilities as director of the art collections was appointing foreign agents in Vienna, Paris, Madrid, Rome, and the Netherlands to buy paintings for the king's ever-growing museum. Brühl was so successful that twenty years after his climb to power the royal collections had grown to contain nearly fifteen hundred works. The man most useful to Brühl in these endeavors was Francesco Algarotti (fig. 11).<sup>14</sup>

A Venetian born in 1712, Algarotti traveled widely and spoke several languages. His reputation as an important literary figure was assured by his several publications, above all his *Neutonianismo per le dame*, a simplification of Newton's scientific theories. Handsome, charming, and always sociable, Algarotti made friends wherever he went. In England he knew Alexander Pope; in Paris, Voltaire; and in Prussia he became the intimate of Frederick the Great.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1740s Algarotti came to Dresden, where he struck up a friendship with Brühl, and as a result, was appointed Augustus's minister of war. Algarotti seems to have had very few responsibilities indeed in carrying that portfolio, but he rendered the king service by returning to Italy in 1743 in order to collect paintings for the royal galleries. While in Venice, he commissioned works from Giambattista Tiepolo for Brühl himself, the most important of these being the *Triumph of Flora*, now in the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.<sup>16</sup> It was probably Algarotti who sent Bellotto to Augustus. Returning to Venice just after the eruption of the War of the Austrian Succession, and seeing the falling off in tourism and the subsequent lack of commissions for view paintings, Algarotti must have understood how useful a royal invitation would be to an unemployed *vedutista*.<sup>17</sup>





**Fig. 12**  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left*,  
North Carolina Museum of Art.

Several Italians were already working in the Saxon capital when Bellotto arrived in 1747. Among them were Felicita Sartori, a Venetian who had been in Dresden since 1741. Born in 1715, Sartori had entered the house of the famous Venetian portraitist Rosalba Carriera in 1728, where she worked as a servant in exchange for training as a painter. In 1740 Sartori met one of Augustus's counselors, a Herr Hoffmann, who fell in love with the young woman while visiting Venice. In 1741 Sartori went to Dresden on the invitation of King Augustus, who had tried unsuccessfully to attract Rosalba, whose pastels he greatly admired. When Sartori arrived in Dresden, she married Hoffmann. She died in Dresden in 1760.<sup>18</sup>

Another important Italian artist working in Dresden when Bellotto arrived was the architect Gaetano Chiaveri. Born in Rome in 1689, he had worked in St. Petersburg between 1718 and about 1730 for both Peter the Great and the Empress Catherine.<sup>19</sup> In September 1738 Augustus III commissioned Chiaveri to build a new Catholic church for the Saxon court. The project began as a secret, so as not to arouse hostility within the Protestant public. In June 1739 the purpose of the work was revealed when the first stone was laid at the foot of the Augustusbrücke.<sup>20</sup> The Hofkirche's setting, adjoining the royal palaces but also facing toward the New City, was visible confirmation of the Wettins's faith as well as testimony of the king's own commitment to his Polish crown. The church was not finished until 1755.

Although other Italian artists were also working in Dresden at that time,<sup>21</sup> Sartori and Chiaveri are the two whose actual presence is felt in the two views of



**Fig. 13**  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Dresden with the Hofkirche at Right*,  
North Carolina Museum of Art.

Dresden now in the North Carolina Museum of Art. *View with the Frauenkirche* (fig. 12) was taken from the house of Sartori and Hoffmann. And the church we see standing just to the left of center in that same painting is Chiaveri's Hofkirche. In *View with the Hofkirche* (fig. 13), the Hofkirche appears again, this time dominating the skyline, while our glance is broken in the far distance, just to the right of center, by the Sartori-Hoffmann house facing us from beyond the bridge. Today Sartori's home and the Catholic Hofkirche function as significant points of reference within the two paintings; in 1747 and 1748 the two buildings must have played an important role in Bellotto's social and religious life.

In the *View with the Frauenkirche* (fig. 12), we see the buildings belonging to Count Brühl on the left, sitting on the bastions called the Jungfernbastel. Brühl's complex, begun in 1737 and razed in the late nineteenth century, was designed by Johann Christoph Knöffel (1686–1752), who had earlier been responsible for several other palaces in Dresden.<sup>22</sup> From left to right, there are Brühl's art gallery with its nineteen windows (fig. 14), inside of which the two views now in Raleigh once hung; the tiny garden pavilion sitting at the corner of the projecting bastion; and finally, Brühl's palace itself. Further along the embankment are several of the buildings of the royal palace with the Hausmann Tower standing just behind Chiaveri's Hofkirche. Beyond the Augustusbrücke, one can make out small segments of the Zwinger, after which lies the Dresden suburb of Willsdruff.<sup>23</sup>

In *View with the Hofkirche* (fig. 13), we see the so-called Japanischen Palais on the far left, in the New City. It was destroyed during air raids on Dresden in



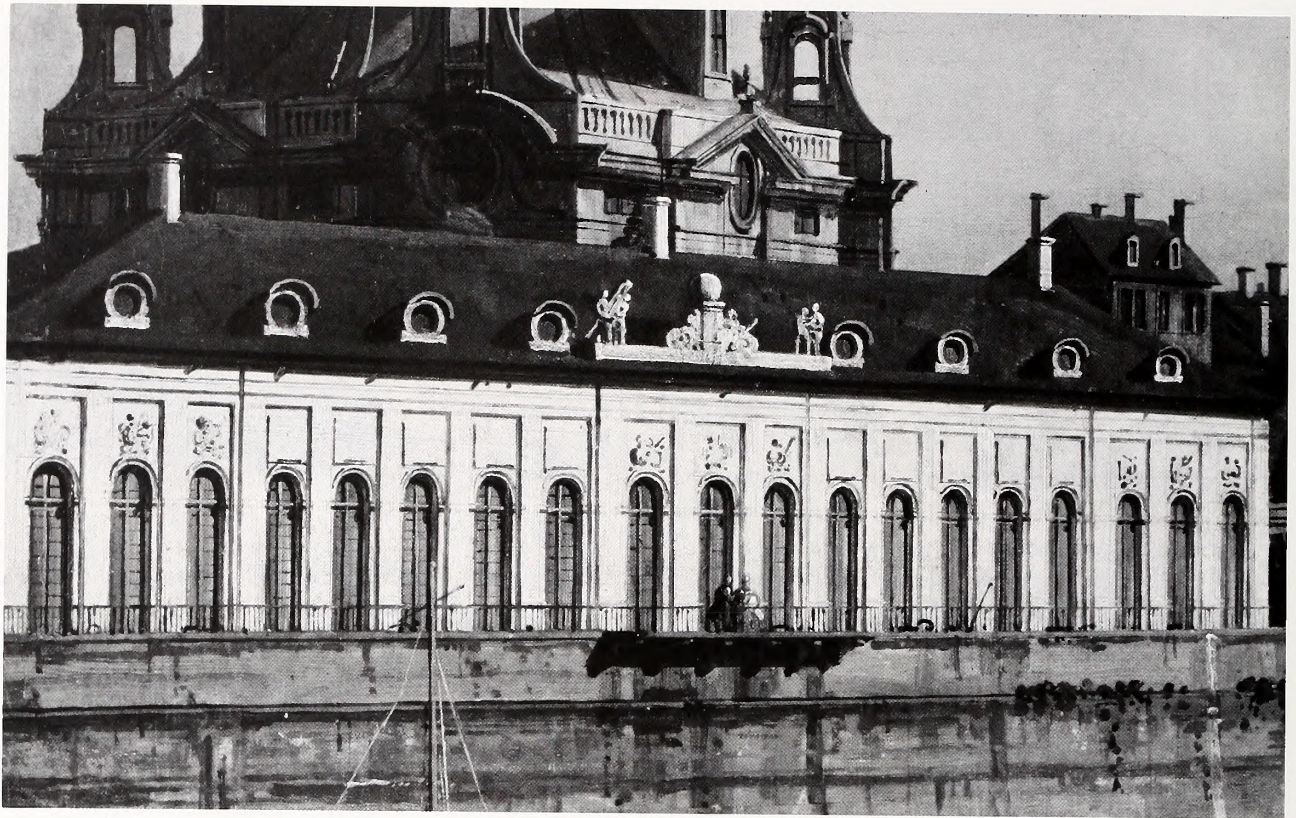


Fig. 14  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left*  
(detail), North Carolina Museum of Art.

February 1945, as were most of the buildings seen in these two views. On the Klostergasse, the embankment leading toward the Augustusbrücke, is a series of wealthy homes, the very last one of which belonged to Sartori and Hoffman.

A number of figures populate the foreground in Bellotto's two views. Before Sartori's home (figs. 12 and 15), several people stand conversing; they have traditionally been identified as personal acquaintances of Bellotto.<sup>24</sup> The two men in the center are supposedly Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich, on the left, and Alexander Thiele, both painters to Augustus III. To our right are the queen's physician, the fat castrato singer Niccolo Pozzi with his back to us, a courtier dressed as a Turk, and the court fool wearing Tyrolean costume. There are, in addition, several workmen engaged in chores, and others. On the Augustusbrücke, a long procession including a coach drawn by two horses crosses toward the New City. In the *View with the Hofkirche* (fig. 13), several people of a more humble

position in Dresden society work and rest in the fields before the moat leading to the Zwinger. All of the figures are painted with Bellotto's characteristically thick and active brushwork. The manner in which the light creates sharp divisions on their clothing and, indeed, their very casual and workaday presence are testimony to how Bellotto's staffage follows closely upon that of Canaletto's.

Bellotto's use of color in these views of Dresden is very different, however, from anything seen in Canaletto. Although the sky and the Elbe River are quite blue and the architecture is brilliantly lit by the sun, Bellotto creates a soft and warm tonality in each painting by his use of greens and neutral earth colors in the foreground. In contrast, Canaletto's sunlit views of Venice, as well as those of London, surprisingly enough, are much brighter, dazzling the viewer with their many sparkling touches of bright reds, yellows, and pinks.





Fig. 15  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left*  
(detail), North Carolina Museum of Art.

Both views of Dresden were executed for Count Brühl right after Bellotto arrived in Saxony. At the same time, Bellotto was working on twenty-five paintings for King Augustus III, fourteen views of Dresden and eleven of Pirna, a nearby suburb where the king visited the royal palace of Sonnenstein.<sup>25</sup> The King's set was completed by 1758. These canvases have remained in Dresden since their completion, and they are among the jewels of the Gemäldegalerie.

In order to ingratiate himself into the favor of the king's powerful first minister, Bellotto also executed a series for Brühl.<sup>26</sup> The set consisted of twenty-one paintings, thirteen duplicating some of the king's views of Dresden and eight some of Pirna. The twenty-one works in the Brühl series were hung with the rest of the count's art collection in the gallery seen in figures 12 and 14.

Bellotto made very few alterations from Augustus's series to Brühl's. Looking specifically at the two paintings in the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh

and their counterparts in the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden (figs. 12 and 13; and 16 and 17), the most obvious alteration is that in the scene composed from the Sartori-Hoffmann house (fig. 16), Bellotto shows himself seated between Dietrich and Thiele in the Dresden version; in the Raleigh version (fig. 12) the two Germans stand alone. Also omitted in the Raleigh painting is the boat that sits next to the near embankment in the counterpart painting. In the two paintings that show the city from above the Augustusbrücke (figs. 13 and 17), there are no significant differences from one version to the other.

But what is different—not from version to version but rather from one view to another within the same set—is the state of completion of Chiaveri's Hofkirche (see figs. 12 with 13, and 16 with 17). In the views from below the Augustusbrücke (figs. 12 and 16), the church facade is still within scaffolding, the bell tower has not been erected, and the royal palace's Hausmannsturm is the dominant vertical motif toward the canvases' center.





**Fig. 16**  
**Bernardo Bellotto,**  
*View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left, 1747.*  
 Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,  
 Dresden.



**Fig. 17**  
**Bernardo Bellotto,**  
*View of Dresden with the Hofkirche at Right, 1747.*  
 Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,  
 Dresden.

But in the two paintings from above the bridge, where the Hofkirche is the principal architectural element (figs. 13 and 17), the bell tower appears to be finished, its scaffolding soon to be taken down (the Hausmannsturm is barely visible). This important alteration from one view to the other within the same set was not based upon visual fact, for the bell tower remained incomplete until 1755.<sup>27</sup> Given that both of Bellotto's paintings of the Hofkirche (figs. 13 and 17) were done in the same year, 1748,<sup>28</sup> what we see must be based on designs that the artist knew directly from Chiaveri's original drawings.<sup>29</sup> In completing the church, Bellotto anticipated what he knew would happen, and he gave both Augustus and Brühl a vision of how the court church would dominate their side of the Augustusbrücke.

In 1756 the Seven Years' War broke out between Prussia and Austria, and Augustus sided with the latter. Frederick the Great of Prussia, marching southward, laid siege to Pirna and Dresden, and both Augustus and Brühl fled to Warsaw in 1760. Bellotto himself had left in 1758 or 1759 for Vienna. He returned to Dresden in 1761 hoping to regain the patronage of both the king and his first minister, but they stayed in Warsaw until 1763, and both of them died immediately after their return to Dresden in October 1763. During their absence from Dresden, both collections of paintings were removed to Königstein Castle; they were transported back to the city in 1763.<sup>30</sup> Upon Brühl's death, Bellotto sued the count's heirs for payment for the twenty-one views, for the first minister had never given the artist the recompense that the contract stipulated. Bellotto's case was not allowed to go to court, and so the series was

never paid for. In 1768 Catherine the Great bought fifteen of the twenty-one works, and they are still in the Soviet Union. Five of the twenty-one remained in Dresden but made their way to England in the late nineteenth century, from whence the two in the North Carolina Museum of Art were acquired in 1952. One painting from the series has completely disappeared.

Bellotto continued to live in Dresden until 1766, when he left for Catherine's court in St. Petersburg. The following year he moved to Warsaw, where he was appointed court painter by the new king of Poland, Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski. In Warsaw and in all the cities of eastern Europe where he worked, Bellotto used his uncle's name and is known there as Canaletto (see his signature in fig. 18). He died in Warsaw in 1780. His uncle had already died in Venice in 1768. The two had not seen each other since 1744. Bellotto's widow, whom he had married in Italy in the early 1740s, remained in Warsaw after her husband's death, and their descendants continued the line there and in the Ukraine well into the nineteenth century.

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Fig. 18  
Bernardo Bellotto,  
*View of Dresden with the Frauenkirche at Left* (detail),  
North Carolina Museum of Art.



## Provenance

Commissioned by Graf von Heinrich Brühl, prime minister of Electoral Saxony and Poland (1700–1763), Dresden; Brühl family, by descent; Rt. Hon. Lord Hillingdon, Hillingdon Court, Uxbridge, England, by 1894; Hillingdon sale, Christie, Manson, and Woods 3 May 1946, lots 43 and 44; [Ellis and Smith, London]; Mrs. Warwick Bryant; her sale Christie, Manson, and Woods, 23 June 1950, lots 67 and 68; [David M. Koetser, New York]; acquired by the North Carolina Museum of Art from Koetser, 1952.

## Select Exhibition

London, Royal Academy, 1894, nos. 107, 122.

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Valentiner, W. R. *North Carolina Museum of Art: Catalogue of Paintings Including Three Sets of Tapestries*. Raleigh, 1956. 77, nos. 175–76.

Kozakiewicz, S. "Eine Dresdener Ansicht von Bernardo Bellotto," *Pantheon* 25 (November–December 1967), 447–48, 452, n. 16, fig. 5.

Kozakiewicz, S. *Bernardo Bellotto*. Greenwich, Conn., 1972. 2: 108, 127, nos. 141, 155, pls. 141, 155.

Camesasca, E. *L'opera completa del Bellotto*, Milan, 1974. 96–97, nos. 75, 80.

## Notes

1. See Valentiner, cat. nos. 175 and 176.
2. The most important publication on the artist is by Kozakiewicz, *Bernardo Bellotto*. See also Camesasca, *L'opera completa del Bellotto*, as well as the catalogue *Bernardo Bellotto genannt Canaletto* (Vienna, 1965), for the exhibition held in Dresden, Warsaw, and Vienna between 1964 and 1965.
3. On Canaletto's prices in the 1720s, see J. G. Links, *Canaletto and His Patrons* (New York, 1977), 13.
4. For Bellotto's Italian period, see Kozakiewicz, 2: 7ff.
5. He did paint a number of landscapes and scenes of country estates during his stay in England, however.
6. See W. Barcham, *The Imaginary View Scenes of Antonio Canaletto* (New York, 1977), 119–20.
7. See Barcham, "Canaletto and a Commission from Consul Smith," *Art Bulletin* 56 (September 1977): 383–93.
8. For Smith and his relationship with Canaletto, see Links; Barcham, "Canaletto and a Commission from Consul Smith"; and F. Vivian, *Il console Smith mercante e collezionista* (Vicenza, 1971).
9. The family moved there early in the century. For a short history of Dresden, see *Enciclopedia Italiana* 13 (Rome, 1932), s. v. "Dresda."
10. He reigned, of course, as George I. For a very readable explanation of this material, see N. Mitford, *Frederick the Great* (London, 1970), 14ff.
11. For further reading on Saxon rococo architecture, see E. Hempel, *Baroque Art and Architecture in Central Europe* (Baltimore, 1965), 190–200, and W. Hagen, *Die Bauten des Deutschen Barocks 1690–1770* (Leipzig, 1942), 99–107. The Augustusbrücke was demolished in 1907 and has since been replaced with a modern span.
12. For a summary of Augustus's achievements in Dresden, see the discussion in the catalogue *The Splendor of Dresden: Five Centuries of Art Collection* (New Haven, 1978), 21ff., prepared for the exhibition held in Washington, D.C., New York, and San Francisco in 1978 and 1979.
13. For Brühl's biography, see *Enciclopedia Italiana* 7 (Rome, 1930), s. v. "Brühl, Heinrich"; and *Der Grosse Brockhaus* 2 (Wiesbaden, 1953), s. v. "Brühl, Heinrich, Graf von . . ."; and O. E. Schmidt, *Minister Graf Brühl und Karl Heinrich von Heineken (1733–1763)* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1921).
14. See E. Bonora, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 2 (Rome, 1960), s. v. "Algarotti, Francesco"; and F. Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New York, 1963), 347–60.
15. For Algarotti and Frederick, see Mitford, 76.
16. See Haskell, 353; and M. Levey, "Tiepolo's 'Empire of Flora,'" *The Burlington Magazine* 99 (1957): 89–91.
17. According to tradition, the invitation to Bellotto had first been offered to Canaletto, but when the latter refused, the younger and perhaps harder nephew went in his place. See P. J. Mariette, *Abecedario de . . . et autres notes inédites de cet amateur sur les arts et les artistes*, ed. P. de Chennevières and A. de Montaiglon (Paris: 1851–53), 115.



18. For a brief resumé of Sartori's life, see the catalogue *Da Carlevarijs ai Tiepolo, Incisori veneti e friulani del settecento* (Venice, 1983), 350-53, prepared for the exhibition in Venice in 1983.
19. See R. Wishnevsky, *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 24, s. v. "Chiaveri, Gaetano."
20. For the Hofkirche, see Hempel, 199-200, and the same author's *Gaetano Chiaveri, der Architekt der Katholischen Hofkirche zu Dresden* (Dresden, 1955).
21. See Kozakiewicz, *Bernardo Bellotto*, 1: 81-82.
22. For Knöffel, see Hempel, 195.
23. For the identifications of all the sites and buildings in Bellotto's works, as well as for the information given below on the whereabouts of the artist's paintings after the eighteenth century, I have relied on Kozakiewicz's masterly catalogue entries in vol. 2, and on his very informed discussions in vol. 1 of *Bernardo Bellotto*.
24. Kozakiewicz, *Bernardo Bellotto*, 2: 108, writes that the identifications were first made by J. Hübner, in *Verzeichnis der Königlichen Gemälde-Gallerie zu Dresden* (Dresden, 1876).
25. For a complete examination of the problem concerning the different series and versions, see Kozakiewicz, *Bernardo Bellotto*, 1: 83ff.
26. See Kozakiewicz, *Bernardo Bellotto*, 1: 102-3.
27. Wishnevsky, *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 24, s. v. "Chiaveri, Gaetano."
28. Both the versions in Dresden and Raleigh are signed and dated; q. v. fig. 17.
29. Kozakiewicz expresses two conflicting points of view about this; (1) that Bellotto copied engravings made after the drawings (see his discussion in *Bernardo Bellotto*, 1: 92-3), and (2) that Bellotto knew the originals by Chiaveri himself (see the entries in vol. 2, p. 116, cat. no. 146, and pp. 122 and 127, cat. nos. 154 and 155). On this matter, see also his discussion in 1: 107-8. Several other versions of these two views, either by Bellotto or attributed to him, also exist. According to Kozakiewicz, there are two of the *View with the Frauenkirche* (vol. 2, cat. nos. 142, 143); according to Camesasca, there are seven (nos. 74A-E, 76, 77). Of the *View with the Hofkirche*, Kozakiewicz says there is but one replica (vol. 2, Z-479), an opinion with which Camesasca agrees (no. 79A).
30. Kozakiewicz, *Bernardo Bellotto*, 1: 85 and 103.





Fig. 1

John Singleton Copley (1738–1815),  
*Sir William Pepperrell and His Family*, 1778.

Oil on canvas, 90 x 108 in.,

signed *J S Copley P/ 1778* at lower left.

North Carolina Museum of Art.

Purchased with funds from the  
 State of North Carolina. 52.9.8



To be "Conspicuous in the Croud":  
 John Singleton Copley's *Sir William Pepperrell*  
*and His Family*

MARGARETTA M. LOVELL

IN AUGUST 1774, two months after he had left his native Boston and scarcely a month after arriving in London, the city that would be his home for the second half of his remarkable career, the painter John Singleton Copley wrote to his younger half-brother, an aspiring artist, "you must be conspicuous in the Croud if you would be happy and great."<sup>1</sup> We sense that the astute Copley—who had pondered for many years the risks and rewards of challenging the English art establishment on its own ground—was recording his own intended plan of action as much as advising the provincial novice. A few days later Copley left London for a year's sojourn on the Continent, returning in the autumn of 1775. Almost immediately he moved into a house and studio on Leicester Square, "conspicuously" two doors up from that occupied by William Hogarth's widow and across the square from the home of Sir Joshua Reynolds, then president of the Royal Academy.<sup>2</sup>

Even in distant Boston Copley had been aware of the Royal Academy (founded 1768) and its important role in the education and professionalization of artists as well as in the opportunities its annual exhibitions afforded for public exposure and patronage development. He sent paintings to the Royal Academy's spring exhibitions in 1776 and 1777 but received little notice until the spring of 1778, when he sent two canvases of decidedly conspicuous size (as





Fig. 2  
John Singleton Copley,  
*Watson and the Shark*, 1778.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
gift of Mrs. George  
von Lengerke Meyer.



well as a third single-figure work of the type for which he was well known in the colonies). Both of the large 1778 canvases (one six-by-seven feet, the other seven-by-nine feet) were composed of multiple-figure groups and represented a decided departure for an artist who, until his emigration to England three years earlier, had virtually no experience in handling compositions of such size and complexity. Copley's anxiety concerning the management of multigure groups is apparent in the relief he confided to his half-brother after his first reconnoiter of English studios: "I find the practice of Painting [groups] or rather the means by which the composition is attained easier than I thought it had been. The sketches are made from the life, and not only from figures singly, but often from groups. This you remember was [what I] have often talked of, and by this a great difficulty is removed that lay on my mind."<sup>3</sup> The rendering of multiple figures, disposed convincingly in space and enacting a mime that was coherent, original, and dynamic was new to Copley but it was, he knew, the essential characteristic of group portraiture (the genre he anticipated would sustain his livelihood) and history painting (the genre he hoped would bring him fame).

Copley's offerings at the 1778 Royal Academy represented only his second family group, *Sir William Pepperrell and His Family* (fig. 1), and his fourth attempt at history painting, *Watson and the Shark* (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> Considering his novice status, it is remarkable that he should achieve so swiftly such competence, indeed such excellence, especially given the legendary slowness with which he labored at his craft. While *The Pepperrell Family* received only brief and disparaging notice by the critics, *Watson* was praised as "among the first performances in this exhibition" and launched his reputation.<sup>5</sup>

Overshadowed by the more prominent genre and public acclaim of *Watson*, the Pepperrell family portrait is nevertheless a key work in Copley's career, one that points to both the artist's and the patron's strategy for positioning themselves in a novel environment, and simultaneously, but less consciously, serves as an index to broader issues of social history including eighteenth-century Anglo-American narratives of family, childhood, time, and death.

While for Copley the exhibition of *The Pepperrell Family* functioned as a kind of advertisement of his competence and availability in the genre that the English

gentry were most wont to patronize, for William Pepperrell III the public presentation of his familial image served his own long-range purposes. Commissioned shortly after both Copley and the Pepperrells had emigrated from Boston to London, the painting preserves—or rather asserts—an image of the Pepperrell family that had scarcely ever existed and that certainly had altered irretrievably by the time the work was executed and exhibited in 1778.<sup>6</sup> That both artist and patron found it suitable to fictionalize the situation, to gloss over certain realities and hyperbolize others, not only suggests their willingness to ignore facts or to follow portrait conventions, but also points dramatically to the extraordinary power of the underlying family-structuring function of portraiture in the Anglo-American world. Not merely an idle public expression of pride or a display of personal beauty and worldly acquisitiveness, the eighteenth-century portrait was addressed primarily to family members, and it codified in an orderly manner horizontal relationships of power as well as vertical relationships of descent. For this reason most eighteenth-century American and English portraits were commissioned at the point of marriage, the birth of an heir, the attainment of majority, or a moment of singular achievement, marking these notable and potentially disruptive or contested changes in the family line, the family name, and family wealth among those families fortunate enough to have inheritable substance.<sup>7</sup> Pepperrell's family was one of substance. His maternal grandfather William Pepperrell II (fig. 3) (1696–1759) was a successful merchant in lumber and fish, and a soldier whose command at Louisburg was rewarded with a baronetcy (a unique distinction for a colonial family). William Pepperrell III, who adopted his grandfather's name on succeeding to his fortune in 1759, had attended Harvard, done the Grand Tour, and consolidated the family fortunes by marrying the daughter of Isaac Royall, a member of the King's Council at Massachusetts, a rum merchant, and one of the wealthiest men in New England.

Pepperrell commissioned this portrait after the birth of his heir (the cherubic figure whose umbilicus marks the center of the canvas), and shortly after the Crown granted his petition to revive the baronetcy awarded his grandfather, the hero of Louisburg, and to succeed to the title himself.<sup>8</sup> The image, then, is of a buoyant, stable, aristocratic, American household, presided over



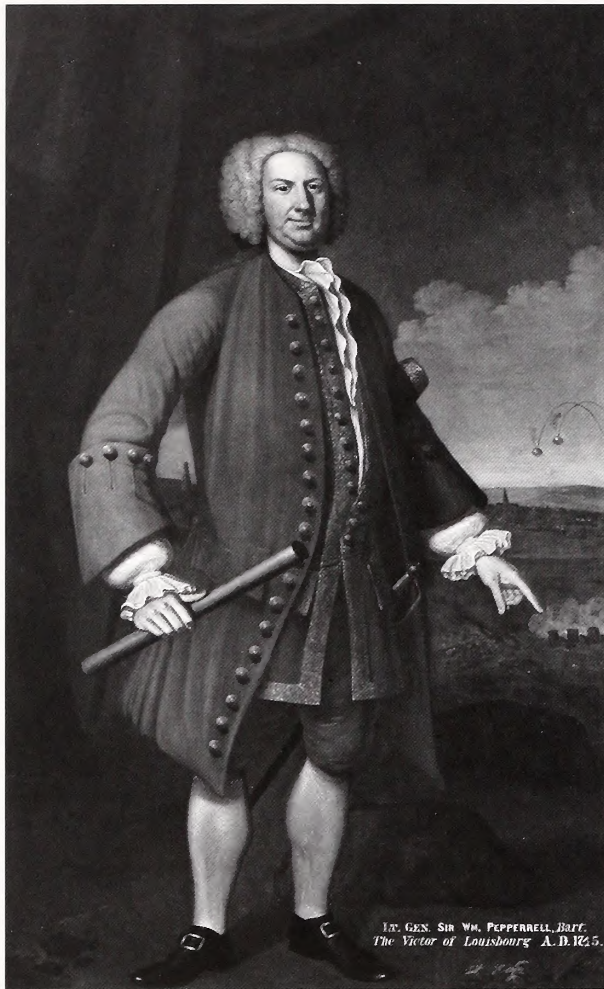


Fig. 3  
John Smibert,  
*Sir William Pepperrell*, 1746.  
Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

by a statuesque maternal figure and an admiring, urbane baronet, a family in which the line has just been reelected in status and ensured of perpetuation by the birth of an heir. In reality, the child, William Pepperrell IV, was born in the turbulence and privation of Boston in July 1775, when British troops occupied the city, keeping an uneasy peace between Loyalists and revolutionaries.<sup>9</sup> The young mother, Elizabeth Royall Pepperrell, died three weeks after his birth. The prosperity and calm, the exuberant health and confidence with which Copley has endowed the family mask the grim reality of Elizabeth's death, Sir William's censure as a Loyalist by the York County Congress, the family's loss of its considerable fortune and revenues from the rents and profits of the confiscated Pepperrell lands, shipping, and lumber mills in New England, the anxiety of life in the rioting and bitterness of Boston before they emigrated in February 1776, and the uncertainty of exile in the almost-alien environment of London.<sup>10</sup>

Copley's is a portrait in the subjunctive mode. It posits a "what if . . ." scenario, imaging the family as it might have been a year after young William's birth had war and financial loss, public animosity and death not robbed the Pepperrells of halcyon prospects on their Roxbury estate, funded by the immense wealth and landholdings amassed by Sir William's grandfather and great-grandfather in Maine.<sup>11</sup> For Sir William the portrait functioned as an assertion of the salvageability of dignity, confidence, prosperity, normalcy, and familial wholeness in an uncertain exile that offered the widower and his family only limited prospects. As it happened, Sir William was pre-deceased by his heir, and the family fortunes (and Copley's portrait) devolved on Harriot, here imaged as a tot seated on a table and busily engaged in a game of skittles, later Lady Palmer, dowager-matriarch of Wanlip in Leicestershire. There the painting hung until 1933, a graphic assertion of rules obeyed, conventions embraced, and continuity asserted in the teeth of rupture and loss, and a reminder to her descendants of the Pepperrells and their four-generation interlude as colonial Americans.<sup>12</sup> Seemingly stable and coherent, the narrative of the painting was inscribed by its author and patron within this unstable conjunction of modes and tenses, a wistful pantomime of history as it "will not have been."





Copley's portrait includes six life-size figures and two dogs in a spatially ambiguous but stately setting. Bracketed by such standard portrait conventions—one might call them visual clichés—as the drawn-back taffeta curtain and the glimpsed pastoral landscape, the baronet and his daughters gather on a colorful “turkey work” carpet around Lady Pepperrell and young William. Although Lady Pepperrell is a seated, still form, anchored in space by the white, insistently vertical column that silhouettes her head and marks her presence with permanence and resonance, all the other figures lean and stretch, their emphatic contingency and activity emphasizing her stability and calm. Yet this centrality and gravity of deportment are not simply tributes to her as a cherished and dignified memory, nor are they characteristics resulting solely from the exigencies of an artist working from stand-in models, miniature portraits, and working drawings.<sup>13</sup> The mother-as-cynosure was a well-established, socially significant visual conceit during this period, one pointing to a new seriousness, even sacredness, in the maternal role as custodian of the moral well-being of impressionable children. Similarly, Sir William's leaning posture, his crossed legs, his gentle touching of the baby's arm, and his focus of attention on his family are characteristic of father figures in Anglo-American family portraits of the period.

**Fig. 4**  
**Robert Feke, *Isaac Royal and Family*, 1741.**  
 Harvard Law School Art Collection,  
 Cambridge, Mass.





Fig. 5  
John Singleton Copley,  
*Sir William Pepperrell and His Family* (detail),  
North Carolina Museum of Art.

The treatment of parental figures and children in family portraits differed markedly between the first and second halves of the eighteenth century. A brief glance at the portrait of Elizabeth's parents, *Isaac Royall and Family* by Robert Feke (fig. 4), painted almost forty years earlier, clarifies the dramatic character of this change. Where early in the century the child was stiff, the father dominant in his posture and address to the spectator, and the mother a quiet secondary figure, by the 1770s the infant twists and gambols, the father leans, touches, and looks at his brood, and the mother is given centrality, a self-involved seriousness, and visual dominance.<sup>14</sup>

Central to the portrait's composition and to its meaning is young William, pictured here as a robust toddler standing on his mother's lap, reaching and looking toward his father's face (fig. 5). His mother, father, and eldest sister touch, hold, and embrace him, encircling his young frame with security and affection. That his status in the picture and in the family is different from that of his sisters is indicated not only by his central position in the composition and the attention lavished on him by his kin, but also by his nudity. He is the only figure not wearing eighteenth-century age-specific and gender-specific clothing. A loose drapery suffices for modesty, but his otherwise rosy pink body provides a stark contrast to the tailored fabrics worn by the older members of the family. It is improbable that young William spent much time unclothed, and unclothed infants are not common in eighteenth-century portraits.<sup>15</sup> We can attribute Copley's presentation of young William then, to painterly allusion, recalling both the long tradition of the decorative classically inspired *putto* and the specific tradition of the Christ Child with the Madonna.

But the most telling allusion in William's figure might be even more immediate. It is curious that while the surviving preparatory studies for this painting show variant positions for each of the other figures, the baby's outstretched right arm and upward gaze remain constant (figs. 6, 7).<sup>16</sup> Thus, though Copley struggled with the placement of the girls and the stance and gaze of the father, his concept of young William remained fixed from the start. He had tried earlier, in *The Copley Family* (fig. 8) to link youngsters to adults by their upward-reaching arms and gazes, but William's pose—more open and dynamic—is different. Indeed, it mimics the





Fig. 6  
John Singleton Copley,  
*Study for Sir William Pepperrell and His  
Family (Mother and Four Children)*, 1777–78.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
M. and M. Karolik Collection of  
18th-Century American Arts.

outstretched right arm and raised left knee of the nude Watson in *Watson and the Shark* (fig. 2), Copley's companion-piece for the Pepperrell portrait at the 1778 Royal Academy exhibition.

As Watson's pose and nudity reflect Copley's quick absorption of the principles of visual quotation, deliberately evoking the Hellenistic figure of the gladiator at the Villa Borghese, William's pose mimics and quotes Copley's own heroic Watson, subtly endowing his young frame with consequence and resonance.<sup>17</sup> And the two images, radically different in their genre, tone, and impact, are, in a sense, subtly answering texts. While *Watson* hyperbolizes the agony and strain of a dramatic rescue at sea in the face of a savage attack, *The Pepperrell Family* images a more abstract triumph of continuity and life over loss, diminution, and death. Both canvases focus on a gladiator-posed, male nude protagonist, whose reaching posture is answered by the leaning, straining, twisting forms of companions in contemporary costume. In both images there is a single calm figure—



Fig. 7  
John Singleton Copley,  
*Study for Sir William Pepperrell and His  
Family (Mother and Two Children)*, 1777–78.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
M. and M. Karolik Collection of  
18th-Century American Arts.

Lady Pepperrell in *The Pepperrell Family* and the black seaman in *Watson*—whose centrality and stability provides a telling foil for the contingency and turbulence of the other figures. These poised, thoughtful rather than active figures seem repositories not only of physical calm but also of knowledge and perhaps empathy—they seem equipped to interpret as well as experience the lesson of the picture's event and thus, in seeing “beyond,” act as models for the viewer.

The viewer's attention is drawn into the Pepperrell family group by young Elizabeth, who, leaning on a footstool at her mother's knee, embraces her baby brother and casts a smiling glance directly at the spectator. Her gray-blue eyes solicit our attention, and her posture indicates where we should direct our gaze. Elizabeth (b. 1769), characterized as a toddler by her mother as “a very frolicsome body,” is an ideal intermediary; her winsome smile does much to draw in the viewer and temper the sobriety of her parents.<sup>18</sup> Her





Fig. 8  
John Singleton Copley,  
*The Copley Family*, 1776-77.  
National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, D.C.,  
Andrew W. Mellon Fund.



dress—like those of her sisters—is white, of a thin, gauzy fabric. An abstract figure of a white, three-leafed sprig marks the surface, echoing the more substantial white, green, and pink floral buds that ornament her elaborate headdress. A transparent salmon-colored sash edged with gold, which trails from her waist, is picked up in an ostrich plume that tops off her elaborate cap, its pinkish hue repeated in both her mother's and her sister's less exotic headdresses.

None of the figures wears jewelry (beyond the gold buckles on Sir William's shoes and knees, and the single strand of pearls in Lady Pepperrell's hair), but a tone of understated opulence is evident in the rich variety of textiles utilized throughout the composition. Indeed the painting includes a veritable lexicon of eighteenth-century textiles of English and foreign manufacture, including the elaborate "turkey work" carpet, a lush velvet tablecloth edged in a wide gold fringe, satin-weave silks (in Lady Pepperrell's dress, the drawn-back curtain, and Sir William's waistcoat), the delicate figured cottons of the girl's dresses, the handsomely finished wools of Sir William's coat, and the elaborate embroidered collar on young Elizabeth's dress.

In his American portraits Copley had included masterfully portrayed still-life elements, but rarely did his range in tactile variety reach the demonstration-piece level of *The Pepperrell Family*. Here he has not only incorporated an unusual multitude of fabric types, but he has also devised novel techniques for their portrayal, notably the heavy impasto with which he picks out the gold fringe and the rich lace of Elizabeth's elaborate collar. The impasto interrupts the smooth fiction of the paint surface and insists on our attentive reading of these costly trims as sculpturally, physically present. Touch, thematized repeatedly in the image as each figure touches skin, costume, or inanimate object, is presented synthetically in the richly tactile passages of various textiles.

Unlike William, whose centrality is marked by his difference from the others in the family, Elizabeth's role as intermediary is marked by reiteration. She initiates us into the picture and introduces each character in the family drama. Young Elizabeth is linked to her mother by proximity and by the repetition of a transparent, violet, gold-figured cloth in the fichu at the elder woman's neck and in her young namesake's cap. She is linked to her brother by touch, her sisters by dress, and her father by a parallel, inward-leaning posture. Elizabeth's gaze

breaks the genre-fiction of the tableau and reminds us that the image is a performance, an enactment completed only by the presence of an audience. And this audience is both the general one of the commissioning Pepperrell family over time and the specific one of the 1778 Royal Academy viewers. The tertiary audience that we constitute—as strangers two centuries later who find the painting both legible and obscure—is necessarily distanced. And yet Elizabeth breaks through that distance and implores our attention to the facts and fictions of the tableau she eagerly presents.

In a photograph of the image, Elizabeth's role is central. Standing before the painting itself, one is equally aware of a competing gaze—that of the dignified springer spaniel on the far left. The spaniel's attention is riveted on the viewer, and his eye level is only slightly below the viewer's own, which hovers about the tabletop even when the enormous canvas is hung as low as possible. In the eighteenth century the painting was almost certainly hung higher, and the presence of the two dogs was even more evident. Our attention is drawn to this corner of the canvas and away from the central action by the bright shiny lock that closes the larger dog's collar and by the black King Charles spaniel, who gazes alertly away from the family and toward his canine companion.

Copley had used pets in earlier portraits to help characterize sitters—indeed, he included a small King Charles spaniel in his portrait of Lady Pepperrell and her sister, done when they were girls twenty years earlier (fig. 9). In most such images, the pets help direct our gaze toward the sitters' faces or hands; here they draw our attention to a peripheral corner. But this is strategy and not accident, for it is here, just to the left of the precisely and brightly delineated collar padlock—one of the brightest spots on the canvas—that we find Copley's oversized signature. In his campaign to be "conspicuous" at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1778 Copley, who had signed fewer than a quarter of his American portraits, took care to sign prominently both this and the *Watson* paintings, announcing his authorship and availability. Guarding the "J S Copley P[inxit] / 1778" inscription, the larger spaniel with his steady dignified gaze plays the role of the artist's intermediary, while Elizabeth is the family's. They solicit our attention and regard, and ask us to collaborate in constructing the archetypal domestic fiction and in acknowledging its authorship.



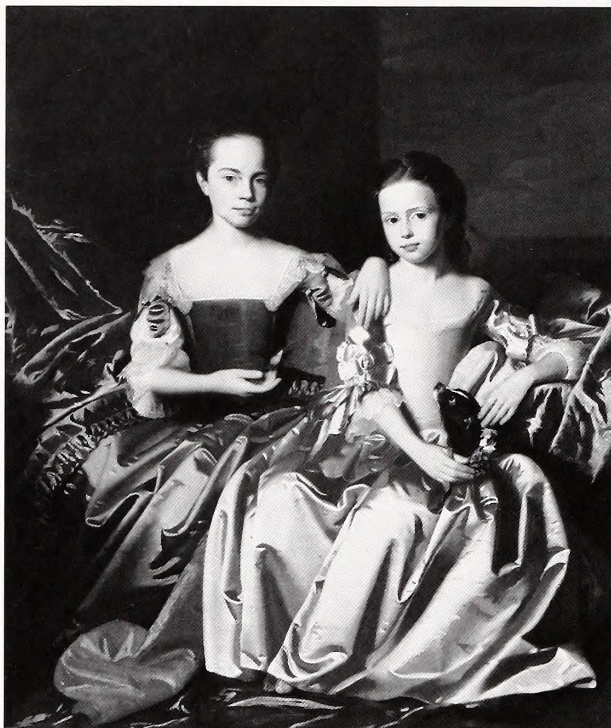


Fig. 9  
John Singleton Copley,  
*Mary MacIntosh Royall and Elizabeth  
Royall, 1758*. Museum of Fine Arts,  
Boston, Julia Knight Fox Fund.

Balancing the spaniels on the opposite side of the family group (and marking the third angle of a carefully structured triangle whose other corners are marked by the heads of Sir William and his stately brown-and-white spaniel), Mary ("Polly," b. 1771) and Harriot (b. 1773) concentrate on a game of table skittles. Mary stands on a footstool similar to that on which her mother's foot rests. It is upholstered in a green velvet, matching the fabric used in the opulent gold-fringed cloth that tumbles in disorderly elegance from the mahogany table on which young Harriot sits and which is the site of their game. The table and footstools are unusual in their sharply tapering legs, and their matte surface suggests that Copley—who made much of gleaming polished mahogany in his American portraits, but avoided this effect, beyond the table corner evident here, in his English pictures—had already internalized the British dictum to suppress furniture in the interest of textiles. Indeed, the disarray of the tablecloth—caused, we presume, within the fiction of the image, by the

children's activities—gives the artist an opportunity to display a virtuoso passage of drapery painting, and gives the Pepperrells an opportunity to suggest the financial power evident in its deeply piled surface and extravagant gold edge, picked out in dazzling and emphatic impasto. The disorder into which this cloth has tumbled is negligible in the sphere of domestic concerns to which it refers. It is easily put to rights. Yet the deeper disorder at the heart of this domestic circle—the absence of the dead mother—is seamed over, denied. A chaos of cloth is permissible because manageable, a chaos in human relations is unimaginable and unpicturable.

Within the fiction of the image, the tablecloth, pulled so negligently from its place, preserves yet one small island of smooth, horizontal, geometrically precise surface, and it is here that the girls assert order and pattern over disorder as they place their neatly turned vertical pieces. By the late eighteenth century the game of skittles, ninepins, or kayles, as it was variantly called, already had had a long history. The modern game of bowling suggests the scale on which the pieces were usually made, but miniature sets, such as the one in use here, were also popular.<sup>19</sup> In Mary and Harriot's game one piece stands, two are being placed, and two lie fallen on the velvet. The other four pieces are perhaps covered by the girls' skirts. That the pieces must be placed with care in an understood pattern is evident from the girls' concentration. That the object of the game is to obliterate the pattern with an artfully thrown ball (here dormant and innocent on a fold of cloth near Mary) we know from common cultural experience. The game suggests cyclical rounds of pattern and chaos, order and disorder. Like the disorder of the cloth, disorder among the skittles pins is permissible, controllable, diagrammable, and paintable, unlike the infinitely more open-ended and threatening disorder of domestic upheaval, loss of patrimony, and loss—in the painting's metaphoric language—of its pillar of stability. The game is included here not only because eighteenth-century children had more games and playthings than ever before, and Copley is diligent in including them in his family portraits, but also because, for the Pepperrells, an alternate universe in which action is predictable and chaos mendable was important.<sup>20</sup> The portrait itself performs this function on a large scale, positing rules of inheritance, domestic normalcy, and financial security for a family unsure of all three. Copley sets his figures as Mary and Harriot set



their humanoid-shaped pins into a culturally understood, stable pattern of relationships, asserting and freezing them on canvas as though the bowler Fate had not already obliterated the pattern by death and revolution.

That Copley's painting is a fiction, a halcyon vision of a time that never was, is emphasized by its spatial ambiguities. Most American eighteenth-century portraits place the figures in a furnished room, the wall of which opens with an unglazed window onto a landscape. Eighteenth-century English portraits, on the other hand, often place sitters out-of-doors, and here we see Copley partially accommodating this custom by positioning the Pepperrells in a liminal zone, on an imagined veranda or portico, its massive scale indicated by the central anchoring pillar. While the "indoor" architectural space is articulated on the right of the image and underfoot by massive draperies, a grand carpet, and drawing room furniture, the exterior space described on the left side of the image presents—seemingly on the same level—an "outdoor" tapestry of picturesque trees and dappled lawn. The picture space on the right is shallow; that on the left is deep. The primary character of the space on the right is marked by a white, geometrically precise marble column, that on the left by a dark, irregular curving tree as congruent with Sir William's leaning posture as the column is with Lady Pepperrell's alert verticality. The fictive nature of this pictorial space is underscored by a discontinuity in the light between foreground-interior and background-exterior. A strong, midday, semidiffused light washes the foreground figures, its source high over the painter/viewer's left shoulder. Yet the deep recession of the distant landscape displays the long shadows of late afternoon. Indeed, the sky above the most distant copse is already tinged by the violet hues of a setting sun. Just below this softly chromatic sky a single tree displays yellow foliage, suggesting an autumnal season and an early frost within the yet-green lushness of the loosely brushed middleground landscape. Here in the pastel sunset and the distant autumnal tree Copley has interjected a quietly elegiac note within the context of an image that otherwise asserts normalcy, hope, and promise.

For both Copley and Pepperrell, this portrait signaled the hopeful repatriation to Great Britain of their re-emigrating families with more skills, greater financial power, and a more gentrified social position than their emigrating parents (in the case of Copley) and great-

grandparents (in the case of Pepperrell). The movement of both families was from the periphery (the Singletons and the Copleys from western Ireland, and the Pepperrells from Revelstoke on the Devonshire coast) to the center, London, by way of the colonies.<sup>21</sup> And this point of arrival that was in fact a rearrival is an integral part of the creation and our understanding of this portrait. Pepperrell, whose great-grandfather William Pepperrell I had left England an illiterate orphaned fisherman apprentice, was returning with a baronetcy, a potential fortune, an heir, and a bevy of soon-to-be-marriageable daughters.<sup>22</sup> It was, at the time, unclear which side would win the war, and the enormous fortune amassed by his predecessors was still potentially recoverable.<sup>23</sup> But his bid for an established social and financial status for his family line and for his nuclear family was eclipsed by the failure of Britain to win the war and of the United States to reimburse Loyalists afterward, by the paucity of the Crown's reparation of Loyalist claims, and by the death of his only son (long an invalid) without issue in 1809.<sup>24</sup> The moment of hope, of possibility in the teeth of death and revolution, captured by the painting soon faded to a bitter memory, and Sir William spent his final years in the self-imposed isolation of a misanthropic exile, withdrawn even from the eager gestures of his less-defeated daughters.<sup>25</sup>

Copley's hope for the painting—the expectation that it would win approval and bring him further commissions—was similarly dashed when the work received disparaging notice in the press as "a mere daubing," a response, perhaps, to his determined inclusion of virtuoso passages of every conceivable type of textile: satin, velvet, sheer cottons, *coulour changeante* silks, embroidered figures, and tassels of gold thread.<sup>26</sup> Although he received significant subsequent commissions for single-figure portraits, it was almost a decade before he undertook another family group. On the other hand, the praise lavished on *Watson and the Shark*, his other 1778 Royal Academy offering, served, no doubt, to reinforce his ambition to earn fame and fortune in this more complex, more highly valued, and more "conspicuous" genre.

Although it failed to establish Copley's reputation as a group portraitist, *Sir William Pepperrell and His Family* gave Copley valuable practice in composing multi-figure canvases, practice he would utilize in his history paint-



ings, especially when he began to include portraits of participants in his distinctive modernization of the genre. Copley's hybrid historical works, incorporating recognizable physiognomies within pantomimes describing topical momentous events, engaged a large portion of his English career and won him the acclaim he so purposefully pursued. To this success the Pepperrell portrait made a certain—if indirect—contribution.

From the point of view of the Pepperrells, the portrait no doubt functioned as a useful fiction, a document of confidence and wholeness in the face of calamitous upheaval. Both to the surviving figures—Sir William, young Elizabeth, Mary, and Harriot—and to Harriot's descendants, who observed it in the background of their quotidian lives among the squirearchy in Leistershire at Wanlip—it diagrammed a cohesive family unit. It documented a longed-for memory of a moment that never was, but which gave order, pattern, and identity to a tumultuous chapter in their shared history.

For the contemporary viewer, reading the painting's surface, decoding its patterns, and deriving pleasure from its success as an artfully constructed composition, *Sir William Pepperrell and His Family* documents norms of behavior and of relationship that belong to a specific era and a specific concept of the unitary family. It suggests—with the basic motif of the game—that rules and conventions are shared and operational. Yet the tumbled tablecloth and the stretching contingent figure of the infant heir in his heroic nudity incorporate a counter-metaphor of disorder, imbalance, and vulnerability. This tension between basic metaphoric systems is as important and as telling in the image as its well-seamed junctures between fiction and verisimilitude. Although the painting might have proved a failure for Copley in his bid for family portraiture commissions and for Pepperrell as an appropriate announcement of his family's second coming to ancestral turf, it is clearly—from the perspective of two centuries—a successful encoding of central cultural, as well as personal, preoccupations, desires, and memories.

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## Provenance

Commissioned 1778 by Sir William Pepperrell, London; to daughter Harriot, wife of Sir Charles Thomas Palmer, Bart., Wanlip, County Leicester; by descent in Palmer family until 1933; [J. Rochelle Thomas, Georgian Galleries, London, 1934]; William Randolph Hearst, St. Donat's Castle, Wales, 1935; [Mallett & Son, London]; [Thomas Agnew & Sons, Ltd., London, 1952]; [Scott and Fowles, New York, April 1952]; acquired by the North Carolina Museum of Art from Scott and Fowles, 1952.

## Select Exhibitions

London, Royal Academy, 1778, no. 63 (as *A family; whole length*).

Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, "John Singleton Copley, 1738–1815," 18 September–31 October 1965, then traveling, no. 66, illus.

Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "American Portraiture in the Grand Manner, 1720–1920," 12 November 1981–31 January 1982, no. 16, illus.

## Select Bibliography

Howard, Cecil Hampden Cutts. "The Pepperrell Portraits." *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* 31 (1894–95): 54–65.

Valentiner, W. R. North Carolina Museum of Art: *Catalogue of Paintings Including Three Sets of Tapestries*. Raleigh, 1956. 40, no. 9.

Prown, Jules David. *John Singleton Copley*, 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass., 1966. 2: 264–67, 315, 318, 363, 428; figs. 356, 357–361.

Browne-Wilkinson, Virginia. *Pepperrell Posterity*. Privately printed, 1982. 126, pl. 15.

Lovell, Margaretta M. "Reading Eighteenth-Century American Family Portraits." *Winterthur Portfolio* 22 (Winter 1987): 243–64, 252, 254, fig. 13.

## Notes

1. John Singleton Copley to Henry Pelham, 17 August 1774, in *Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley and Henry Pelham*, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections 71, ed. Guernsey Jones (Boston, 1914), 240–41, cited by Prown, 2: 246.
2. Prown, 2: 259.
3. Copley to Henry Pelham, 15 July 1774, cited by Prown, 2: 245–46.
4. Preceded by *The Ascension*, 1775 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), *Priam Beseeking Achilles for the Body of Hector*, 1776 (lost), and *The Nativity*, 1776–77 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and *The Copley Family*, 1776–77 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) (fig. 8).
5. Quoted by Prown, 2: 267.
6. Browne-Wilkinson, 126.
7. See Margaretta M. Lovell, "Painters and Their Customers: Aspects of Art and Money in Eighteenth-Century America," in *Of Consuming Interest: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville, Va., 1991).
8. William Pepperrell II (1696–1759), merchant of Kittery, Maine, was honored by a baronetcy in 1746 as a result of his successful



- command in the siege of Louisburg in 1745; his son, Andrew, died childless; Sir William made provision in his will that his daughter's son, William Pepperrell Sparhawk (1746–1816) succeed to his estates, provided he assume his grandfather's name; he thereafter is known as William Pepperrell III, and figures in the title of this painting as Sir William Pepperrell. He was created baronet in 1774 and died in 1816 when the baronetcy became, once again, extinct (see G. E. Cokayne, ed., *Complete Baronetage*, vol. 5, 1707–1800 [Exeter, 1906]).
9. Browne-Wilkinson, 113–15.
  10. *Ibid.*, 112–13, 116.
  11. *Ibid.*, 4–23.
  12. *Ibid.*, 134–203.
  13. Anna Wells Rutledge, "American Loyalists: A Drawing for a Noted Copley Group," *Art Quarterly* 20 (Summer 1957): 195–201; Prown, 2: 265, figs. 357–360; Browne-Wilkinson, 126.
  14. See Lovell, "Reading Eighteenth-Century American Family Portraits," 243–64.
  15. For another example see Benjamin West, *Arthur Middleton, His Wife, Mary (née Izard), and Their Son, Henry, 1700–1771* (private collection, on loan to Middleton Place Foundation, Charleston, S.C.).
  16. See Prown, vol. 2, figs. 357–61:
    1. A study for the group composed of Mrs. Pepperrell and the four children; black and white chalk on blue-gray grounded paper, 11¼ x 17¼ in. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, M. and M. Karolik Collection) (fig. 6; Prown, fig. 359).
    2. A study for the entire composition, including a black servant behind the two girls on the right; black, white, and red chalk on white paper, 17 x 21¼ in. (sight), coll. of Commander Peter Du Cane, Haselbech Grange, Northampton, England, in 1966 (Prown, fig. 357).
    3. A study for Mrs. Pepperrell and young William; black and white chalk on pinkish-buff paper, 17¼ x 13¼ in. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, M. and M. Karolik Collection) (fig. 7; Prown, fig. 360).
    4. A study for the entire composition, very similar in composition to the painting, except the pose of Sir William; black and white chalk on white paper, 17 x 21 in. (sight), coll. of Baron Aberdare, London, in 1966 (Prown, fig. 358).
    5. A study for the figure of Sir William Pepperrell; black and white chalk on buff paper, 17¼ x 10¼ in. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) (Prown, fig. 361).
  17. See Prown, 2: 271–74, fig. 379. The figure's inversion is attributable to Copley's use of a print source.
  18. Browne-Wilkinson, 95.
  19. Mrs. F. Nevill Jackson, *Toys of Other Days* (New York, 1968), 161–62; Claude Tchou and René Alleau, eds., *Dictionnaire des Jeux* (n.p.: Musée de l'Histoire de l'Éducation, 1964), 425–27.
  20. See *The Copley Family* (fig. 8), *The Sitwell Family, 1786* (private collection), and *The Knatchbull Family, 1800–1802* (private collection).
  21. Prown, 1: 7; Browne-Wilkinson, 4–7, 10.
  22. Browne-Wilkinson, 4–5.
  23. Sir William was the president of the Loyalist Association and the Board of Agents, organizations of expatriate American loyalists designed to further the interests and prosecute the claims of members. Browne-Wilkinson, 122–24.
  24. Browne-Wilkinson, 124, 219–20. Pepperrell's total claim was for £35,702.3.8 for house, farms, mills, lands, furnishings, and unpaid notes.
  25. Browne-Wilkinson, 155–56.
  26. Critic writing in the *Morning Post*, 25 April 1778, in "Cuttings from English Newspapers on Matters of Artistic Interest, 1686–1835" (London, n. d.), 1: 160. Cited by Prown, 2: 267–68.





Fig. 1

Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788),  
*Ralph Bell, 1772.*

Oil on canvas, 92 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 61 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.

North Carolina Museum of Art.

Purchased with funds from the State  
of North Carolina and the  
North Carolina Art Society  
(Robert F. Phifer Bequest). 52.9.70



## A Case of Mistaken Identity: Thomas Gainsborough's *Ralph Bell*

HUGH BELSEY

ON 23 MARCH 1772, Ralph Bell of Thirsk in North Yorkshire set out on a journey 250 miles southwest to Bath. The trip took five days, and his arrival on 1 April was announced in the *Bath Journal*: "Arrived here . . . Mr and Miss Bell."<sup>1</sup> A cursory note in Bell's diary records, "return'd from Bath home May the 16."<sup>2</sup> Ralph Bell is all but silent about his six-week visit to the city. The shops were second only to those in London in the range and quality of goods they offered, and he took the opportunity of increasing his wardrobe by purchasing "a laid hat & crimson suit, 2 suits of Bath Beaver [and] a shooting Hat."<sup>3</sup> To him nothing else seemed important enough to record in his diary. His reticence is surprising, for during his stay in Bath, Ralph Bell took the opportunity to commission and sit for a portrait by Thomas Gainsborough. The full-length portrait, which until recently was misidentified as a portrait of John Scrimgeour, is now in the North Carolina Museum of Art (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

The portrait shows a bluff, thick-set man of fifty-two strolling in a landscape. Standing on an ill-defined pathway with hills in the distance, trees on the right, and a river far below him to the left, he is silhouetted against heavy clouds. His attention has been momentarily caught by something beyond the edge of the canvas, and he pauses to take a pinch of snuff. The low horizon has enabled the artist to contrast the head against a typically overcast west-





Fig. 2  
 Anthony van Dyck,  
*Portrait of Sir John Suckling*, c. 1637–38.  
 Frick Collection, New York.  
 Copyright the Frick Collection,  
 New York.

country sky. It also provides a certain grandeur and anticipates the probable hanging position of the painting, four or five feet from the floor. The pause on a country walk, the portrayal of the sitter during a momentary lapse of attention, and the use of sky can all be seen in many other portraits by Gainsborough.

Gainsborough's portrait of Bell shows the influence of a seventeenth-century prototype. A year or so before the artist decided to leave his native Suffolk in the east of England and settle in Bath, he had traveled westward to undertake a commission for the Earl of Jersey at Middleton Park in Oxfordshire. On the same trip he had an appointment at Hartwell Park, near Aylesbury. There he painted a pair of head-and-shoulder portraits of Mr. and Mrs. William Lee. Surprisingly, the receipt for the portraits is preserved in the Eastlake Library at the National Gallery in London. It reads: "April 19th 1759. Recd of William Lee Esq, the sum of sixteen guineas in full for a portrait of Mrs. Lee and another of himself. £16-16. Tho. Gainsborough."<sup>5</sup>

Presumably his visit was long enough for him to study the picture collection at Hartwell. And William Lee's collection included a particularly fine example of early seventeenth-century portraiture, Sir Anthony Van Dyck's *Portrait of Sir John Suckling* (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The unsurpassed stature of the Flemish artist as the painter *par excellence* of the English aristocracy in the halcyon days of the seventeenth century would naturally have drawn Gainsborough's attention.

But Gainsborough's portrait of Bell is not merely a slavish updating of Van Dyck's portrait of Suckling. Unlike the Van Dyck, Gainsborough's piece has the easy naturalness resulting from the artist's close and accurate observation of his sitter's movements and behavior as well as of his physical appearance. And more obviously, the two works differ in the poses of the sitters. Overhanging rocks in the Suckling portrait and the overcast sky in that of Bell emphasize the sitters' heads, but the manner in which this is done underlines the artists' different approaches. Bell's hands, especially his left hand, are closer to those of Van Dyck's *Portrait of Jane Goodwin*, *Lady Wharton*, which was at Houghton in Gainsborough's time.<sup>7</sup> Van Dyck's sitter stands on a loggia toying with drapery with a glimpse of landscape beyond. In Gainsborough's work the figure is in a natural landscape.



Gainsborough was more successful than any other English painter in linking his sitters with the landscape, which he often used as background. Two other portraits dating from about the same year as the Bell painting provide interesting comparisons. The portraits of Abel Moysey, M.P. (exhibited at Gainsborough's House, Sudbury) and Dr. Ralph Schomberg (National Gallery, London) also show professional men pausing on a country walk high above an imaginary river valley.<sup>8</sup> All three subjects wear a stock, shirt, waistcoat, coat, breeches, stockings, and buckled shoes. All three hold canes and hats. Bell's descendants still preserve his cane and shoe buckles.

Of the three, the Moysey portrait captures the most movement (fig. 3). Like the stationary moment of a swinging pendulum, the sitter's pose is caught as he shifts his weight from one leg to the other. He rests his cane on his shoulder like a billiard cue and holds a hat in his left hand, making the line of the taut left side of his body restless. Gainsborough clearly enjoyed offsetting the counterpoint of the silhouette with the formation of jagged rocks and foliage on the right. That and the diagonals of the body set against the calm sweep of the landscape behind give a tension to the composition.<sup>9</sup>

In comparison, Schomberg is more poised (fig. 4). He stands against an almost identical landscape. The brown foliage at the bottom right, as in the Moysey painting, sets off the skirts of the sitter's coat, and the gentle curve of the rock above is continued in the sitter's right forearm. These features help to unite figure with background. Ralph Bell's likeness is midway between the moods of these two portraits.

In the Bell portrait, sitter and landscape are connected by the green branches on the right cradling the sitter's left elbow and the white cloud to the left emphasizing the linen cuffs and the nervous activity of the sitter's hands. Gainsborough was obviously worried about the profile of the figure, and as x-ray photographs show, he experimented with the outline before arriving at the effect that most satisfied him. As in the Schomberg portrait, the cane provides an anchor, which is further emphasized by the verticality of the watch fob peeping from beneath his waistcoat. In comparison with both the Moysey and Schomberg portraits, the background in the Bell portrait seems unfinished. The background, as one might expect, would be the last part of the painting to be completed. The sitter would be present when



**Fig. 3**  
Thomas Gainsborough,  
*Portrait of Abel Moysey, M.P.*, c. 1771.  
Exhibited at Gainsborough's House,  
Sudbury.



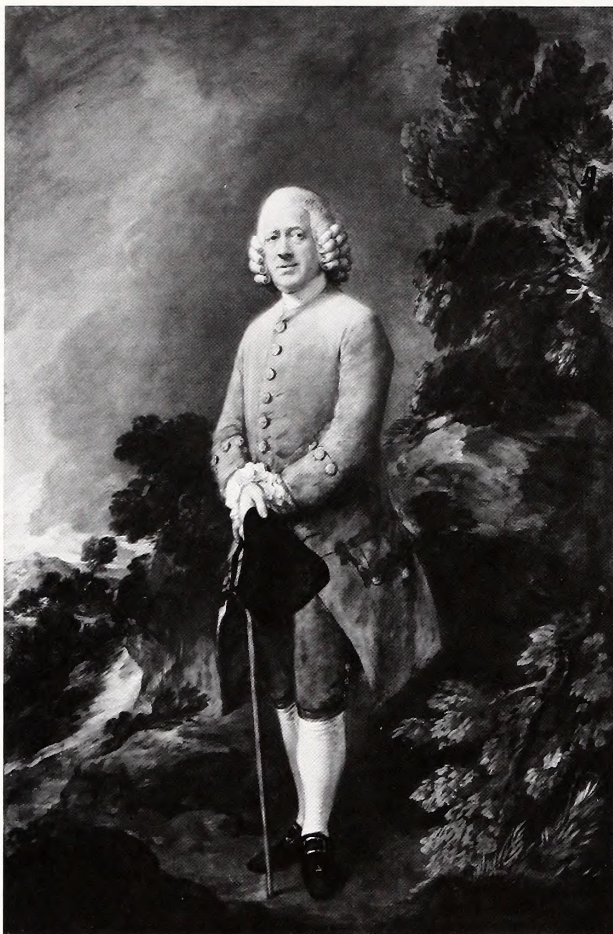


Fig. 4  
Thomas Gainsborough,  
*Portrait of Dr. Ralph Schomberg*, c. 1770-71.  
National Gallery, London.

Gainsborough blocked in the main compositional forms of the portrait; he would be there when the artist worked on the head. But the clothes and background were generally finished later on, and in Gainsborough's case that could be several years later.<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, it is not known when Bell received delivery of the portrait. It may well have languished in the artist's studio in the Circus in Bath until the artist decided to move to London late in 1774. Busy with moving house, Gainsborough may have been less inclined to complete the portrait to his usual standard of finish. Conjecture perhaps, but only by the end of 1774 had Ralph Bell finished altering his house so that it could do justice to such a grand portrait.

The portrait of Bell was destined for the Hall at Thirsk (fig. 5). Ralph Bell's great-uncle, also called Ralph, had purchased the manor from John Poole of Liverpool and Henry Gill of Burscough, who were acting as agents for James, Earl of Derby, and attempting to rationalize the nobleman's estates. Although resident in Sowerby, about three miles to the east of Thirsk, Ralph Bell had been Member of Parliament for the town in three successive elections of 1710, 1713, and 1715. Two years later he became a Customer of the port of Hull, a lucrative position that enabled him to pay £6,300 for the manor of Thirsk on 14 January 1722.<sup>11</sup> At his death in 1735, the estate passed to his nephew, the son of his sister Elizabeth Consett. Upon his inheritance, anxious for continuity, the family was renamed Bell. His son Ralph, who was baptized at Thirsk on 12 October 1720, was the visitor to Bath in 1772, and it was he who sat for Gainsborough.

Later members of the family were not as successful in obtaining public appointments, but the younger Ralph's marriage settlement provided increased income. Ralph's father-in-law, John Conyers, gave notice of his intention in a note dated 9 March 1761: "In Consideration [of the] Marriage intended to be shortly solemniz'd between Ralph Bell the younger of Thirsk in the County of York Esquire & my Daughter Ann, I promise to pay to the said Ralph Bell during the joint Lives of him & my said Daughter a Moiety of full half of the clear Rents and profits of all the Messuages Cottages Lands Tenements Hereditamints lying & being in Scarborough, Rillington Kilham Hunmanby & Bonwick in the said County . . . being late the Estate of my dec'd wife."<sup>12</sup>



Furthermore, John Conyers's elder brother George, a London apothecary, in his will dated 15 November 1770, bequeathed a sum of £2,000 to his niece, Ann Bell.<sup>13</sup> So at the death of his father late in 1770, Ralph Bell was in a strong financial position. At that time Thirsk Hall was an undistinguished two-story, five-bay house situated next to the church, on the outskirts of the town. Bell family tradition states that Ralph's wife, Ann Conyers, the provider of the family's newfound wealth, found Thirsk Hall particularly inadequate and pressed her husband to make substantial alterations. He was quick to approach the Yorkshire architect, John Carr, and decided to add another story to the central block and wings at either side. Because a full set of accounts dating from 1771 to 1775 exist, it is possible to chart the progress of the improvements to the building.<sup>14</sup>

John Carr was not a surprising choice of architect for a man like Bell with new wealth and status. Carr's practice was centered in York. Although he had no formal training in architecture and never traveled to the Continent, his restrained Palladianism served his north-country clients well. Generations of his family had owned stone quarries in the west of Yorkshire near Wakefield, and like them John had originally trained as a stone mason. His father was appointed a surveyor of bridges in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and his mother, Rose Lascelles, was a gentleman's daughter, which provided useful contacts. Before the death of his father, John Carr had already taken the lead in designing buildings, and by 1757 he had moved to York. He became established as a designer of houses for gentry throughout the region. His personal popularity and charm helped him to become Lord Mayor of York in both 1770 and 1785, and his financial success eventually enabled him to purchase an estate at Askham Richard just outside the city.<sup>15</sup>

The first interim account of work on Thirsk Hall is dated 6 October 1774 and includes making "the plans of the Old house, and the new Wings and all the parts thereof at large for the workmen, and making all the drawings for the chimney pieces, Bases, Surbases Architraves and all the other drawings for the Joiners, Plaisterers &c and measuring of their several works, and giving all the necessary directions for the proper execution of the work for 3 ½ years from June 8: 1771. The whole designs drawings and directions included at 30 Guins. a year £110-5s-0." Separate accounts,



Fig. 5  
Thirsk Hall, east front. The wing on the right-hand side includes the dining room where the Gainsborough portraits hung.

endorsed by Carr's signature, are submitted for "the Masonry . . . by John Peacock. In Building the New Wings and Rising the House." Peacock's bill is dated 28 February 1773, and those for carving by Robert Blaksley and plastering by James Henderson are both dated 2 November 1774. A Mr. Dodesworth was also used as a tradesman, but his separate bill no longer exists.

The final payment was the subject of some embarrassment, and Carr had to use all his diplomacy and charm. He had made an erroneous calculation and writes from York on 18 February 1775:

I have not words to express the sense of Gratitude which I feel at your sending back my Bill, as I could not from my own find out where the Error was. I herewith return the Bill just as it was, from which you will in a moment see where the mistake was. You will observe that

the Total of the Bill is ————— £ s d  
289 "7 "8

And I had received  
of you sometime since just 57 "0 "0  
Subtract 57£ from £ s d  
289 "7 "8

and you will find the Balance is — 232  
And in my Bill it is only put down £132:7:8  
In that I fell short of the right sum just £100:—





Fig. 6  
Thomas Gainsborough,  
*Portrait of Ann (Conyers),  
Mrs. Ralph Bell, c. 1775-78.*  
Private collection, England.

You will please to observe I have not altered a figure in the Bill, but at the bottom thereof have shown that the Error was in Subtracting the fifty seven pounds from the whole sum—and that Error is 100 pounds in my favour, which I am very sorry should have hap[pe]ned in my account to you, but I am very happy that it has hap[pe]ned in the hands of a Gentleman who I am confident will take no advantage of it, but will I hope excuse it, remit the balance when it is convenient.

Perhaps Bell's tardy payment four months later indicated his displeasure. The same letter is endorsed: "July 12th 1775 Received from Ralph Bell Esqr. One hundred pounds." Despite his understandable irritation with the accounts, Bell had every reason to be pleased with his enlarged house.

The largest sums of money were lavished on the "Great Dining Room" in the new north wing. The marble chimney piece cost £52.10 and a detailed list of architectural carving by Robert Blaksley, costing £30.8.5, appears in his account dated 2 November 1774. Henderson, who is responsible for much of the plasterwork in Carr's houses, charged a total of £158.9.10 for plastering in the north wing, which included £74.12.4 for "484 feet of Ornamental Cieling Consisting of Foliage, Trophies, of Different sorts; Vases, Shields, swags of Husks and all Compart moldings &c" in the "Great Dining Room."<sup>16</sup> It was in this room that Gainsborough's portrait of Ralph Bell was to hang.

After the portrait of 1772 was installed in the dining room, Mrs. Bell decided to sit for Gainsborough herself (fig. 6).<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the date of her visit to the artist's new studio at Schomberg House in Pall Mall, London, is unrecorded, but it must have taken place in the middle years of the 1770s.

Although the two Bell portraits were not designed to be hung together, they were placed on either side of the chimney piece in the dining room.<sup>18</sup> An anonymous note in a periodical of 1866 brought the two portraits to the attention of a wider public,<sup>19</sup> and both paintings were included in the Gainsborough retrospective exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1885.<sup>20</sup> The increasing regard for the artistic and financial value of Gainsborough's work encouraged the owners to sell the paintings, and in November 1897 the London dealers Thomas Agnew and Sons purchased the portraits from



a J. H. Ward, who must have been acting for the Bell family.<sup>21</sup> The vendor, Reginald Bell, a descendant of the sitter, commissioned copies to hang at Thirsk Hall from Stephen Richards, a self-described painting restorer about whom almost nothing is known.<sup>22</sup>

Agnew's eventually passed the Gainsborough portraits on to another dealer, Forbes and Paterson, in May 1901. Both works appeared at Christie's on 19 May 1911, still correctly identified as portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Bell.<sup>23</sup> A lawyer, John Scrimgeour, bought the male portrait, and his descendants sold it at Sotheby's in 1953. The portrait passed to the New York dealer Clyde Newhouse, where the former owner's name was confused with that of the sitter and the true identity of Gainsborough's client was lost. The Bell portrait was purchased by the North Carolina Museum of Art soon afterward.

Subsequent generations of the Bell family tried to discover the fate of the portrait of their ancestor. The painting had not been photographed at the Christie's sale in 1911, however, and it has not been illustrated in monographs about the artist. Neither family nor scholar was able to link the portrait by Gainsborough in Raleigh with the copy by Richards in Thirsk until 1990, when contemporary artist Graham Rust, a mutual friend of John Bell and the author, provided the connection and the correct identity of the sitter as Ralph Bell was established.

The portrait of Bell is one of the few male, full-length, Bath-period Gainsborough portraits in America.<sup>24</sup> It comes from the time when Gainsborough was in many ways at his most inventive, and it provides an important link between other preeminent British portraits in the North Carolina Museum of Art such as Van Dyck's *Lady Villiers with Charles Hamilton, Earl of Arran*, and Sir Henry Raeburn's *Earl of Kinnoull*.<sup>25</sup>

*Hugh Belsey is Curator at Gainsborough's House, Suffolk, England.*



## Provenance

Commissioned in 1772 by Ralph Bell, Esq., Thirsk Hall, North Yorkshire; thence by family descent to Reginald Bell, Esq., until 1897; [J. H. Ward, London, 1897]; [Thomas Agnew & Sons, Ltd., London 1897–1901]; [Forbes & Paterson, London, 1901]; Norman Forbes Robertson, London; his sale, Christie, Manson, and Woods, 19 May 1911, lot 104, bt. Gilbert; John Scrimgeour, Esq., London; Scrimgeour family, by descent; sale, Sotheby's, London, 20 May 1953, lot 95, bt. Croft; [Newhouse Galleries, New York]; acquired by the North Carolina Museum of Art from Newhouse, 1954.

## Select Exhibition

London, The Grosvenor Gallery, 1885, no. 43.

## Select Bibliography

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Valtiner, W. R. *North Carolina Museum of Art: Catalogue of Paintings Including Three Sets of Tapestries*. Raleigh, 1956. 55, no. 79.

Waterhouse, E. *Gainsborough*. London, 1958. 54, no. 61; 100, no. 770.

## Notes

I should like to thank Mr. Graham Rust for bringing the Richards copies of the Bell portraits to my attention, Mr. John Bell for his help and encouragement, and the staff of Northallerton Library, North Yorkshire Record Office; Bryan Crossling of the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle; and Ann Bukantas of the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull. Finally my thanks to Anthony Janson who has generously provided me with photocopies of the contents of the files of the North Carolina Museum of Art.

1. *Bath Chronicle*, 12, no. 598 (Thursday, 2 April 1772). The announcement of Bell's arrival is repeated in *Boddely's Bath Journal* 29, no. 14 (Monday, 6 April 1772). Miss Bell remains unidentified. A portrait, reputedly by Gainsborough, of a Miss Bell, is recorded as being lent to Hereford Art Gallery in April 1912 (no. 126) by Mr. W. J. Davies. However, no photograph is known of this painting, and the attribution must remain tentative (annotated copy of catalogue owned by Hereford Museum and Art Gallery; information kindly provided by Miss A. E. Sandford).
2. Bell Papers, North Yorkshire Record Office, Northallerton, ZAG. Hereafter referred to as Bell Papers.
3. Bell Papers. See Trevor Fawcett, "Eighteenth-Century Shops and the Luxury Trade," *Bath History* 3 (1990): 49–75.
4. The date of the painting has been contentious. It acquired the date of 1778 when it was sold in 1953, and the 1778 date is repeated by John Hayes in his Tate Gallery exhibition catalogue (*Thomas Gainsborough* [1980]: 105–6). Sir Ellis Waterhouse's catalogue (*Gainsborough* [London, 1958]; references to paintings recorded in the Waterhouse catalogue are hereafter given the catalogue number preceded by the letter W) records the painting twice, first as the portrait of Ralph Bell (W61), which he dates: "probably middle 1770s," and second as "Full-length man holding snuff box" (W770), which he suggests dates from the "Middle Bath Period." Waterhouse did not venture a date for the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Bell in his earlier catalogue (E. K. Waterhouse, "Preliminary check list of Portraits by Thomas Gainsborough," *Walpole Society 1948–1950* 33 [Oxford, 1953]: 8).
5. See John Hayes, *The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough* (London, 1982), 1: 61–62. At Middleton Park Gainsborough painted both William, 3d Earl of Jersey (Clarendon Collection, W399) and his son Lord Villiers, later 4th Earl (last recorded with Howard Young in New York in 1936, W400). The portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Lee (W434 and W435) are last recorded at Christie's on 24 November 1922, lot 137 (purchased by Douglas), and in the Heathcote Art Foundation sale at Sotheby's New York on 15 January 1987, lot 140.
6. The Suckling portrait had been inherited by Lee's forebear Ann, Lady Lee, the niece of Van Dyck's sitter. The canvas left Hartwell in 1918 when it was purchased for the Frick Collection in New York where it remains to this day. See *The Frick Collection: An Illustrated Catalogue* (New York, 1968), 1: 194–97; and Malcolm Rogers, "The Meaning of Van Dyck's Portrait of Sir John Suckling," *Burlington Magazine* 120 (November 1978): 741–45.
7. Oliver Millar, *Van Dyck in England* (London, 1982), 92, no. 52.
8. W506, pl. 137; and W604, pl. 146, color pl. opp. p. 44, respectively. The Moysey portrait is published in Hugh Belsey, *The Moysey Family* (Sudbury, 1984), no. 7; and the Schomberg is the subject of an article by David Bomford, Ashok Roy, and David Saunders, "Gainsborough's Dr. Ralph Schomberg," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 12 (1988): 44–57.
9. X-rays of the Moysey painting show that Gainsborough made dramatic alterations to the composition. The sitter's right leg originally passed in front of his left leg, and his right foot rested on a rock. The original composition had affinities with Benjamin Wilson's *Portrait of Charles, 9th Viscount Irwin*, c. 1752–58 (Temple Newsam House, Leeds; Elizabeth Einberg, *Manners and Morals* [London, 1987, 217, no. 210] and Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Philip Gell*, 1763 (Private collection; Nicholas Penny, *Reynolds* [London, 1986]: 172, 217–18, no. 50). There is no evidence that Gainsborough knew either composition, as neither was engraved. All three paintings look back to Van Dyck's *Pembroke Family* (Millar, 28), which of course Gainsborough painted from memory after he visited Wilton in 1764 (Marquess of Northampton, Castle Ashby; W1015).
10. Enough is known of Gainsborough's working method through contemporary references and extant unfinished works to understand something of his working practice. Dorothy Richardson in her diary entry for 7 May 1770 mentioned a number of portraits that "had only the faces completed, the Drapery [and presumably also the background] being unfinish'd" (Hugh Belsey, "A Visit to the Studios of Gainsborough and Hoare," *Burlington Magazine* 129 [February 1987]: 108). *The Portrait of 4th Earl of Abingdon* (private collection; W8, pl. 188) continues this method. It is close enough to the *Portrait of Carl Frederick Abel* (Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.; W1, pl. 171) for us to propose a date of c. 1777, the year Gainsborough exhibited the Abel portrait at the Royal Academy.
11. William Grainge, *The Vale of Mowbray: A Historical and Topographical Account of Thirsk and Its Neighbourhood* (London, 1859): 71–72.



12. Bell Papers.
13. Ibid.
14. All the accounts cited are Bell Papers.
15. For Carr's career see John Bradshaw and Ivan Hall, *John Carr of York, Architect 1723-1807*, (Hull, 1973); and *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, (Oxford, 1978), s. v. "Carr, John."
16. There are records of Henderson working between 1755 and 1787, and like Carr he was based in York. However, he may not have come from the immediate vicinity. There are records of him training a number of apprentices in the mid-1760s including William Holliday, Thomas Nicholson, and his son Thomas Nicholson, all of whom could have assisted at Thirsk. See Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London, 1975): 223-24.
17. Gainsborough probably charged 100 guineas for both the portrait of Mrs. Bell and that of her husband. Gainsborough increased his charges for a full-length portrait from 80 guineas to 100 guineas sometime between 1770 and 1772 (Waterhouse, *Gainsborough*, 19). For an appraisal of portrait prices, see David Mannings, "Notes on Some Eighteenth-Century Portrait Prices in Britain," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6 (1983): 185-96.
18. Bell Papers. The inventory of 1822 records the Bell portraits in the dining room with a large hunting scene by John Fernley. The only possible arrangement for the portraits is the one proposed. Like the Bell canvases, a similar pair of full-length portraits, those of Lord and Lady Howe (Earl Howe Collection, W386; and the Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood, W387, pl. 88) cannot strictly be called pendants. An alternative interpretation of the evidence put forward by Anne French can place as much as three years between the two paintings (*The Earl and Countess Howe*, ed. Anne French [Kenwood, 1988], 19-20).
19. *Notes and Queries*, 3d ser., 9 (6 January 1866): 9-10.
20. Interestingly, the portraits were not displayed as a pair. The portrait of Ralph Bell was no. 43, that of his wife no. 200. The exhibition brought them to Sir Walter Armstrong's attention. He included them in his cursory catalogue (Armstrong, *Gainsborough*, 192).
21. I am grateful to Christopher Kingzett of Thomas Agnew & Sons for providing me with this information.
22. The full-size copies of the portraits remain at Thirsk Hall. They are both inscribed on the back: "Stephen Richards/Fitzroy Square/ London W1/ January 1898." Richards first appears as a "picture restorer" at 27 Great Pulteney Street in the *Post Office London Commercial Directory* (London, 1885), 1216. In 1888 he moved to 1 Sherwood Street, Golden Square (1888 *Directory*, p. 1250), two years later to 4 Berners Street (1890 *Directory*, p. 1271); and in 1897 to 16 Fitzroy Street (1897 *Directory*, p. 1381). In 1902 his premises were taken over by Evans and Mucklow, who also described themselves as picture restorers (1902 *Directory*, p. 408).
23. The portrait of Mrs. Bell was separated from that of her husband at the 1911 sale. The provenance for her portrait is given by Waterhouse, *Gainsborough*, 54, no. 62. By descent to Reginald Bell (1848-1921); with Thos. Agnew & Sons Ltd., November 1897; with Forbes & Paterson, May 1901; Norman Forbes-Robertson sale, Christie's, 19 May 1911, lot 103, bt. Asher Wertheimer; Alfred H. Mulliken (1854-1931); his posthumous sale, American Art Association, Anderson Galleries, New York, 5 January 1933, lot 52, bt. Sickles; Mrs. William Fox sale, Gimbels, New York, 2 December 1942, lot 84, bt. in; anonymous [late Mrs. Eva Fox] sale, Christie's, 20 November 1964, lot 180, bt. in; sold privately to the present owner's father, February 1965.
24. The "Duveen" taste for female portraits between 1900 and 1920 provided collections in the United States with more full-length portraits of women than of men. Other than the Bell portrait, ten male full-length portraits by Gainsborough are presently recorded in public collections in the United States: *Lt.-General Philip Honywood on Horseback*, completed 1765, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; *Lord Rivers*, completed 1769, Cleveland Museum of Art; *Jonathan Buttall "The Blue Boy,"* completed 1770, Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.; *Lord Ligonier*, completed 1771, Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.; *Sir William Johnston-Pulteney*, c. 1772, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven; *John Eld*, c. 1772, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; *John Heathcote*, c. 1772-74, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; *Carl Frederick Abel*, completed 1777, Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.; *Duke of Hamilton*, c. 1778, Detroit Institute of Arts; *John Langston*, 1787, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
25. See E. P. Bowron, ed., *North Carolina Museum of Art: Introduction to the Collections* (Raleigh, 1983), 126, 138.



## Technical Notes on Gainsborough's *Ralph Bell*

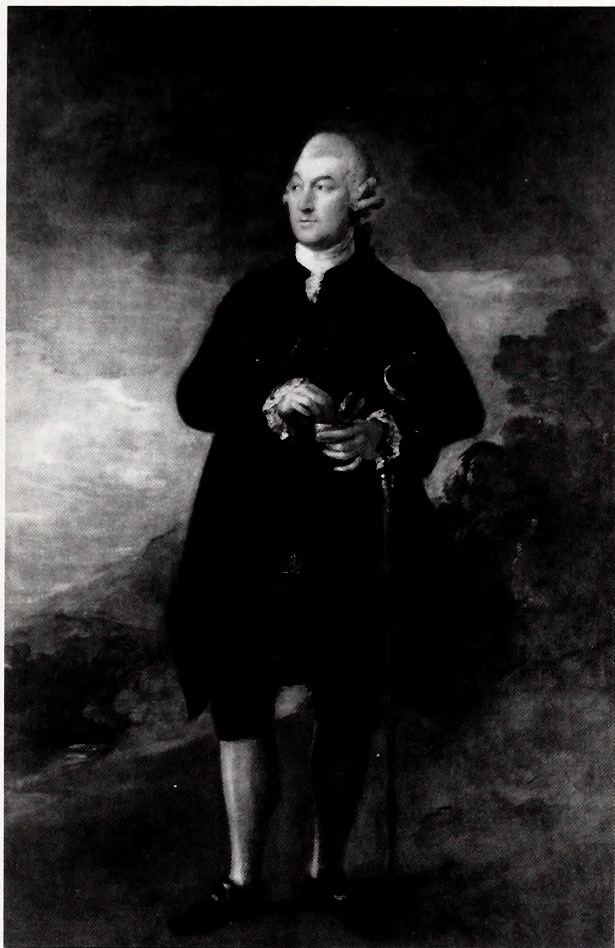
DAVID C. GOIST

A full appreciation and understanding of Thomas Gainsborough's *Ralph Bell* has been obscured in recent history by its present appearance (fig. 1). Speculation that the painting had been badly abraded by harsh treatment and that its dark brown tonality is due to discolored varnish led to the decision to perform a technical study on the portrait. To answer questions about its condition, and to support curatorial research on the painting, the study was begun in 1990 (Goist).

The study consisted of infrared photography, ultraviolet-produced visible fluorescence photography, x-radiography, pigment analysis with a polarizing-light microscope, and study of paint and ground cross-sections. Extant technical studies on Gainsborough's painting materials and techniques were also reviewed. Of particular interest was a comparison with the *Portrait of Dr. Ralph Schomberg* (National Gallery, London) (fig. 4, p. 47), which was also painted by Gainsborough in Bath between 1771 and 1774, around the time of the 1772 Bell portrait. Both portraits are painted in oil on canvas and are almost identical in size. Gainsborough's painting materials and techniques as well as the condition of the Schomberg portrait are discussed in a 1988 *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* article (Bomford, Roy, and Saunders, 44-57).

In creating a painting, the artist's first step is to apply a ground, or priming, layer to the canvas. Traditionally, most ground layers are of white pigments bound in linseed oil or glue. At various periods in the history of art, painters have experimented with toned grounds, either by adding colored pigments to the priming or by





**Fig. 1**  
**Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788),**  
**Ralph Bell, 1772.**  
 Oil on canvas, 92½ x 61½ in.  
 North Carolina Museum of Art.  
 Purchased with funds from the  
 State of North Carolina and the  
 North Carolina Art Society  
 (Robert F. Phifer Bequest). 52.9.70

applying a thin wash of color called an *imprimatura* over a white ground. Double, toned grounds were widely used by artists in the eighteenth century: Jean Siméon Chardin's *Still Life with Ray Fish and a Basket of Onions* (1731), Luis Egidio Meléndez's *Still Life with Game* and *Still Life with Grapes* (c. 1760–80), and Jean-Baptiste Perronneau's *Portrait of a Lady* (1768) are four examples in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art.

The ground on Ralph Bell's portrait also consists of two layers. Polarizing-light microscopy shows the lower one to be off-white in color, composed of white lead and calcium carbonate. The upper layer is dull pink and, because of its thickness and opacity, should be considered a second ground rather than an *imprimatura*. The double ground layer was found in five out of seven cross-sections sampled from various areas of the Bell portrait. The Schomberg portrait also has a priming of lead white and calcium carbonate, but rather than a thick second layer, a thin brown *imprimatura* was applied on top of the white ground (Bomford, Roy, and Saunders, 57).

An artist will often sketch the outline of the essential composition in charcoal or ink before painting the image. Although no underdrawing was detected by infrared photography in the Bell portrait, the edges of the sitter's form seem to have been adjusted in many areas, especially the legs and arms, during the painting process. It is likely that Gainsborough began the portrait by loosely outlining his subject in very diluted dark paint. The artist used this same underdrawing technique in two unfinished paintings—*Painter's Daughters with Cat* (National Gallery, London) and *The Housemaid* (Tate Gallery, London).

All of the samplings of paint and ground cross-sections indicate that the paint layer is very thin compared to the thick double ground. Even at its thickest, in the flesh in the face or the foliage on the tree at the right, for example, the paint is no more than one-half the thickness of the top dull-pink ground layer. It is possible that the paint layers have been reduced in thickness due to past harsh cleaning treatments, an unfortunate circumstance found in too many old paintings. However, research indicates that Gainsborough intentionally painted the Bell portrait very thinly, permitting the tone of the top dull-pink ground to show through as a middle tone.





Fig. 2  
X-radiograph of *Ralph Bell* (detail).



Fig. 3  
X-radiograph of *Clement Tudway* (detail).



The study of the Schomberg portrait describes Gainsborough's oil-painting technique as having "a greater affinity with the traditional water colour technique of thin transparent washes over a light-coloured ground." (Bomford, Roy, and Saunders, 47). It also notes an observation by the artist's contemporary Ozias Humphrey that Gainsborough painted in a very dim, candle-lit studio. "The logic behind this practice seems to have been that subdued and directed lighting allowed Gainsborough to visualize and map out the main forms, contours and tones more easily" (Bomford, Roy, and Saunders, 44). When viewed today under subdued light (5–10 footcandles) rather than under the brighter lighting (20-plus footcandles) in the North Carolina Museum of Art galleries, the thinness of the paint becomes much less noticeable and the forms and color planes become more legible.

In x-radiographic studies of several heads painted by Gainsborough, one can sense the artist creating forms and shaping them with thin, diluted oil paint. The head of Ralph Bell was x-radiographed for comparison with Gainsborough's portrait *Clement Tudway*, c. 1772, also in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art (figs. 2 and 3). The thinly painted faces of Bell and Tudway are composed of abbreviated yet confident strokes and gestures. In both portraits, the hair was created by a series of energetic diagonal brushstrokes, not unlike the technique of a watercolorist. Gainsborough did not develop his images in a methodical and academic process. Rather, he seems to have thrust paint onto the canvas, applying only enough to achieve the effect he intended. A good example is the bold dash of paint highlighting Bell's right eye, which carries the subject's mood—as well as the artist's style—across a room. Gainsborough was masterful in applying just enough pigment to summarize his forms (whether it be Bell's coat of Prussian blue or the foliage created of Naples yellow and blue), while allowing his ground to show through, serving as a unifying middle tone for the entire composition. Just as with the brown *imprimatura* in the Schomberg portrait, the subdued pink upper ground of the Bell portrait unifies sky, earth, and sitter.

In addition to the variance in light levels, there is another factor that prevents today's viewer from seeing the painting as it appeared in Gainsborough's day. Artists traditionally have used varnish to achieve full color saturation of the pigments as well as to protect the

painting's surface. The cross-sections of paint and ground in *Ralph Bell* also reveal a layer of discolored varnish that is thicker than the paint itself. This coating was probably applied by a dealer shortly before the Museum acquired the painting in 1952. Based on fluorochrome staining of the cross-sections under ultraviolet light, the varnish is probably of the alkyd-oil type, which becomes very discolored after forty to fifty years. The varnish, now a yellow-brown, destroys the delicate tonal balance intended by Gainsborough, shifting the pink ground to a darker tone and making the image murky. Beneath the varnish, the sky at center left is actually a white to light gray, composed of two extremely thin layers of paint. The fact that it was applied unevenly with vertical brush strokes accentuates the canvas weave texture in the clouds at the left.

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Art Gallery of Ontario: p. 15, fig. 3

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Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storici, Milan: p. 18, fig. 7

Ville de Nantes—Musée des Beaux-Arts, Patrick Jean: p. 9, fig. 6

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